

A WINTER'S VOW

ASTER RIDGE RANCH | BOOK I

KATE CONDIE

A Winter's Vow

Aster Ridge Ranch, Volume 1

Kate Condie

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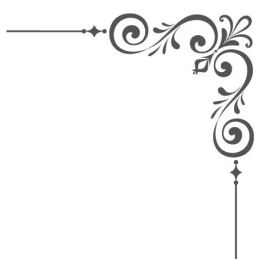
Epilogue

Also by Kate Condie

About the Author

To Cody for encouraging me. I would have hired a babysitter
but your labor was free.

And Michelle for the endless brainstorming sessions where you
wore out your Nikes and braved the ice.



Della



DAISY DELLA HAMPTON rolled her shoulders, trying to ease the aches from the jolting of the wagon. She bolstered herself with the knowledge that her next stop would be the last. In Kirwin, she'd find a hot meal and a bed. She tipped her head in silent acknowledgment that the bed would be occupied by her new husband. Whoever he was. Whatever he looked like.

She turned to the frontier woman driving the wagon. Bronco Nell's eyelashes moved in the breeze. The rest of her face couldn't be seen through the scarf wrapped tightly, as though she were recovering from a broken jaw.

Bronco cleared her throat and coughed, pulling the fabric away from her mouth so she could spit phlegm to the side. "Don't know why you'd want a husband. I get by just fine without one. How close we gotta get before you'll tell me the name of the fellow?"

When the man at the post office in Meeteetse told Della to find Bronco Nell, she'd asked around for a gentleman. After numerous wry glances, she'd discovered Bronco was a stocky woman with thin lips and large eyes who'd scoffed and said she'd take Della up the mountain, but only for the entertainment.

Della had a million questions about her betrothed, but she dared not voice them. The closer she got to Kirwin, the more she feared her courage would fail her. She tucked her lips between her teeth, sticking to her plan to cast him from her mind until the very last moment. "Once we're in Kirwin, I'll tell someone who can help me find him." Della brought her hands to her lips and breathed on them in an attempt to warm her icy fingers. They still smelled of the rosewater she'd used that morning to bathe. A bath to prepare her to meet her husband.

Bronco shuffled her boots, which looked like they'd been chosen from the men's shelf. "Feel this warm air? That's the calm before the storm. Storms coming today or tomorrow."

"Oh?" Della couldn't stop staring at Bronco's boots. They were no doubt a sight warmer than Della's own, which had worn leather and mismatched buttons that allowed the cold air to work its way inside.

"Once that mountain gets a dump, you ain't got a chance of getting

off it unless you intend to snowshoe down these eighteen miles.” Bronco’s eyes moved from Della’s toes to her hair as though she doubted her up to the task.

“I’m certain. James will be expecting me.”

“Ah, James. Finally, the man has a name, though a darned common one, I’d say.” She reached under the seat to pull up a stoneware bottle and took a hearty swig of whatever was inside. Her right eye twitched, and she set it down between her feet.

“There ain’t no preacher up there.” Bronco chortled. “Last one up and left. His wife intended to leave him. Many a woman ain’t up to living through a winter in these hills. More than one wife has refused to stay.”

Bronco’s words painted an interesting picture. A wife dictating to her husband? Della couldn’t ponder the possibility. She had greater worries. No preacher? If Bronco had the right of it, her plans would be ruined. James’s letter instructed her to meet him in Kirwin. Della gnawed her lower lip. If there was no preacher, did James even intend to marry her?

Bronco’s team splashed across a mountain stream. There’d been so many, the hem of Della’s skirt hung damp and dark about her ankles. “How close are we?” Della asked, looking up. She drew in a sharp breath. Nestled against the lush mountainside lay a town. One building had a tall shaft in the center, reaching at least one hundred feet tall. Several smaller buildings and what looked like a two-story hotel lined the main road. Every rooftop was built with the same green tin, and the walls were freshly lumbered and stained. The smell of woodsmoke grew stronger, and she wiggled her toes in anticipation of the warmth to come.

“Kirwin?” She couldn’t keep the hope from her voice.

It must be, because with a shout, Bronco halted the team and shoved the brake forward before a general store.

A man in a white apron stopped sweeping the boardwalk and rested his hand on the top of the wooden handle to greet them with a smile. “Mornin’, Bronco. Didn’t expect you’d brave the trip today. Winds have already started.”

With the buildings on either side of them, the wind wasn’t half as bad as it had been on the road here. Only a slight breeze ruffled Della’s hair as she stood, trying to pull her skirt from where it stuck to her legs while also smoothing out the wrinkles from travel. With shaking hands, she climbed down from the wagon. Once on firm ground, she straightened her spine and lifted her chin. Anyone would see a confident woman if they didn’t also see the tremble along her jaw and the whites of her knuckles as she gripped the wagon’s edge.

Bronco dropped a sack onto the boardwalk. “Mornin’, Tewksbury.

This here is Della Hampton. Come to see a man.” Bronco turned from the manager to speak to Della directly. “Out with it. You’re going to have to tell us his name at some point.”

Della didn't have many inches more than anyone else, but she knew how to use every one of them to advantage, and she did so now, standing as tall as she could. “James O’Leary will be expecting me.”

Bronco and Tewksbury shared a look of pity. Della’s throat dried up like the windblown prairie grasses she’d seen from the train on her way West.

No matter. Della had expected some sort of degenerate. Whole men didn’t advertise for a wife in the paper. Nevertheless, she’d hoped that his isolated living arrangement meant he had less access to women.

“If you could direct me to his living quarters, I would be ever so obliged,” Della added a sweetness she hadn’t granted Bronco.

Bronco stepped between Della and the store manager. “Darlin’, James O’Leary is dead. Coulda told you that back in Meeteetse.”

The woman’s words stole the wind from Della’s lungs, and she pitched backward. Pinpricks of light darted around the edge of her vision. Her back hit the rough wood of the wagon, and it scraped her gown and through to her skin as she slid down. Bronco sprang forward and grasped Della under her arm as though she were one of the packages to be hauled between towns. She set Della down on the porch and gave her back a slap.

“Now, get yerself together. If you help me unload, I’ll take you back down the mountain free of charge. You can spend a night at my place if you need. My daughter Jenny will be thrilled with company.” She raised a flat hand to her eyebrow and gazed into the wind. “I ain’t got time to waste.”

Della sat, fighting for breath. The wooden planks beneath her vibrated with each footfall as Bronco and Tewksbury unloaded the wagon. What would she do now? Without a new name or position as a respectable member of society, she had no chance to outrun the wanted posters for Crazy Daisy.

She straightened her back as her mind whirled through other options. She had three dollars left from her travels. That would pay for two nights in a hotel. Then what? Meeteetse had seven brothels. There seemed to be work for a woman in that town for only one trade. Not to mention the town had access to news. Her picture would reach the post office, and if everyone thought her alone, they’d connect her to the sketch.

She glanced at Bronco Nell, the woman was single and making it on her own. Della stood and took a tentative step towards Bronco. She placed a soft hand on the other woman’s arm.

“Can’t I stay? I don’t want to go back to Meeteetse.”

Bronco shook her head. "Ain't no way. You'll have to come back down to Meeteetse with me. They don't allow single women in Kirwin."

Della balked.

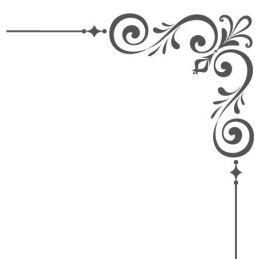
"Ain't my rule." Regret flitted across Bronco's face. "Now, off you go. Use Mr. Tewksbury's outhouse, and we'll be on our way."

Bronco gave Della a push toward the side of the building. She stumbled on numb legs to the small outhouse.

She couldn't shut out a vision of herself standing on a gallows with a crow cawing on a nearby tree. *I'm going to hang.*

She blinked it away, her heart racing. Picking up her skirts, she ran toward the mountainside and behind the houses standing against it. She passed building after building, when she stumbled over the tight space between foundation and mountain, she went a little further and folded herself between the earth and a large barrel. Della slid down and tucked her knees under her chin.

She'd spent three weeks running, terrified she'd be discovered by one of the ruthless bounty hunters roaming the West. She wanted to rest. She needed to rest. But she would not give up.



Bastien



BASTIEN GRAHAM SLID his handkerchief from around his neck and used it to wipe the sweat from his face. He took a moment to face the sky, soaking in the last rays of fall sunshine before winter set in. He refolded the hanky and tied it around his neck. His worn leather boots crunched the rock-strewn dirt as he walked to the manager's door. He gave it two hard knocks and waited.

"Come in," came a tight voice from inside.

Bastien nodded at Mr. Schnitzel as he stepped through the door. "Sir." He removed his hat and held it against his thigh. The office smelled of coffee and tobacco, two luxuries most couldn't afford in this remote town.

"What do you know of James O'Leary ordering himself a bride?"

Bastien laughed. "A bride? Can we pick those up at the general store now?"

Schnitzel didn't join in the laughter. "Bronco Nell brought her up, and now the girl's missing. Goes by the name of Della Hampton. Find her and take her down the mountain." He removed his spectacles and polished them with the cloth he kept in his vest pocket. "If you're quick enough, you can take her on horseback and give the girl to Bronco and be back in time to finish your day's work."

Bastien clenched a fist. He wasn't here to be a lawman. He should be learning how to mine, not dealing with town problems. "Has anyone looked for her?"

"Just Bronco and Tewksbury."

Bastien resisted rolling his eyes. "I'll find her, sir." He strode from the room, placing his hat back on his head with a puff of dust. In a town as small as Kirwin, he should find her in no time and be back to his real job. James's sudden death and the clean up from the accident meant all the miners were working long shifts. The sooner he dealt with this mess the sooner he could get back to work.

After more than an hour of searching, a schoolboy tugged at his hand.

"I found her, sir." His huge blue eyes twinkled with delight.

Bastien leaned forward, bracing his hands on his knees as he whispered, matching the child's mischievous tone. "Good work, Milo.

Can you show me where?"

The boy nodded, his hair shaking into his eyes with the vigorous movement, then he bolted around the side of a building. Bastien took long strides to keep up and followed Milo around the corner. The boy jumped on his toes and pointed behind the assay office.

Bastien pulled a penny from his pocket and offered it to the boy. "Go tell Johnson I need two horses saddled and ready. One for me, one for the lady." He straightened and called, "All right, out with you." He didn't degrade himself by clambering among the debris. It was a shock that any woman would.

When she didn't appear, Bastien hitched his voice louder and called, "Don't make me climb back there. If I do, you or I will get hurt."

A dark head popped up from behind the barrel. She wasn't much taller than the last metal hoop that held the staves together. The lowering sun showed her whiskey eyes, snapping with fire. Would she call his bluff and make him come and get her? Those eyes said she just might.

She squeezed between the house and the barrel, grunting in frustration and looking over her shoulder. Lifting an arm, she seemed to be trying to touch her back. She looked at him with hooded eyes. "I'm caught."

Bastien came near. A nail had worked its way loose and the flat end held fast to a small tear in her blouse. As he worked it free, she kept her eyes downcast, whether from anger, shame, or propriety, he couldn't tell.

As soon as she was free her body twisted and she surveyed the damage with her hand. "tsk." She lifted her eyes to his, shaking the loose hair from her face. "Is Bronco gone?" Her chin raised a fraction.

Bastien surveyed her small frame. She was a wraith. Between her thinness and her faded calico dress, it was no wonder she'd been able to hide so well.

Bastien reached out an arm to shepherd her. "She's gone, but we may be able to catch her. Let's go."

She stepped away from his outstretched hand, surveying him with narrowed eyes.

Bastien closed his eyes, hoping to curb his frustration. "I'm under orders to take you down the mountain. Please, come with me."

Without a word, she walked toward the stables, though he was certain it was luck that she'd chosen the right direction. In a town as small as this her odds were fifty-fifty.

With one long step, he caught up to her and led the way. "Can you ride?"

Schnitzel's plan was astute, but only if she could ride. Leading a

horse would be nearly as slow as taking a wagon.

"What happened to James?" Her voice was curious and feminine, not at all sad about her fiancé's demise.

"Cave in at the mine several weeks ago."

"He promised me a house." Her voice was bleak, not at all the poised veneer the women back home in Chicago boasted.

"Yes, well. That house is occupied by the new foreman."

"Might I meet him? Perhaps *he* is looking for a wife."

Bastien's stomach fell to his feet, then hit his lungs on the way back up.

He shook his head. Ridiculous woman. Did she think this a game? "You can't just show up and expect to marry whoever is the foreman."

"Why not? That's what I was promised."

"Well, the man who promised you those things is dead. I think that absolves him of fulfilling them. Anyways, the new foreman isn't looking to get married."

"Is he already married?"

"No."

"Then how do you know what he wants? Are you a mind-reader?"

"I don't need sorcery to know what I want." He knew exactly what he wanted, and it wasn't a wife. He wanted to learn this one final role in this mine so he could meet his father's demands and get off this cold mountain.

She stopped. "*You're* the foreman?"

Bastien continued toward the stables, hoping his message reached Johnson and they could start down the mountain right away.

She jogged to catch up to him. "So you took on his responsibilities. Well, I'm one of them."

Bastien's toe caught on the rough path, and he stumbled. "You aren't part of the job description." He turned and made his way to the stable, not caring if the cursed woman got lost on the way. When he arrived Johnson was already leading a soft-tempered mare over for inspection. Bastien nodded in approval and turned to Della with a look he hoped conveyed his unwillingness to argue. "Can you ride or not?"

Her chest rose and fell, and her face flushed, likely from keeping up with the pace he'd set. After one purposeful breath, she asked. "May I speak with you privately?" Her gaze flicked to Johnson.

Bastien closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. He counted to four, a trick their governess had taught them to help curb frustration. He met her eyes. "Answer me."

She tilted her head and crossed her arms over her chest.

"You will answer me so Johnson has the information he needs to ready your horse." He gestured to Kirwin's liveryman, who was

buckling a bridle and trying to hide a smile. "Then you may ask me one question." He raised his first finger. "One. Before we head down this mountain. Agreed?"

She nodded as though she were trying to make up for her previous obstinance.

Good. "Can you ride?" He tried not to grit his teeth as he asked the question for the third time in less than an hour. If she were his employee, she'd be out of this town for an entirely different reason.

"No." She eyed the horses and drew herself closer to the stable wall.

He choked down a sigh of exasperation. "Johnson," Bastien called over his shoulder. "We'll need a lead rope."

The liveryman shouted his understanding and Bastien focused on Della. "Well," he waited, narrowing his eyes at the fear he saw on her face.

Her throat bobbed and her gaze flicked to Johnson. She stepped closer and looked at Bastien through her lashes, her eyes glinting in the lantern light. "I *need* a husband. Gracious, have you seen the number of brothels in Meeteetse? Only whores can make their way as single, uneducated women." Her voice shook.

Bastien was reminded of his younger sister Ivete. He dropped his chin with a sigh, his chest stirring as his conscience overrode his pride.

Johnson caught his eye, gesturing that the horses were ready.

Bastien placed a featherlight touch between Della's shoulders and guided her over. "I'll give you what you need to go back to where you came from. I'm assuming you weren't so familiar with James that you want to go to his family?"

She gripped his sleeve, as though she was about to say something, then released it and shook her head. This woman was like Old Faithful. It was only a matter of time before what rumbled beneath shot out of her.

He let the mare lip his hand and apologized to the horse for not having anything to give her. "This here is Crimson. She's a good girl."

Della kept her distance, her gaze darting between Bastien and the animal.

"Ready?"

Della shook her head and looked to the saddle with wide eyes.

"Your left foot goes in this stirrup, while this horn goes between your legs." When she didn't ask any questions, he nodded. "Let's get you up." He slid his hands around Della's waist and hefted her into the saddle.

Crimson side-stepped and Della gasped, her hands grasping the saddle horn in a white-knuckled grip.

Bastien caught her forearm and met her widened eyes. "Steady, girl." He checked the stirrup, satisfied with the length. "Is that your best coat?" Bastien realized the woman must have a trunk of belongings. He looked around as though they would appear at any moment. "Where are your things?"

"I..." She stuttered, "They must be at the store where I left Bronco Nell."

"You mean, *ditched* Bronco Nell." He heaved a sigh and stomped out of the stable.

A large trunk sat squat on the deck of the general store. Tewksbury came through the door.

"This the girl's?" Bastien placed his hand on the trunk.

"Yep." Tewksbury sucked on his tooth. "Reckon you found her."

"I found her." Bastien spat as he drummed his fingers on the wood. He put his hand to his forehead to shield his eyes from the mountain sun while he judged the hour. If he left this minute and rode his horse, he could be back by midnight. Taking a wagon down to Meeteetse would be an entirely different trip. They would arrive after dark and Bastien would have to stay the night in town. He clenched his teeth. Not what he wanted, but with a trunk and a woman terrified of riding, did he really have any choice?

He went back to tell Johnson of the change in plans, then marched down the street to the manager's office. Della could sit on that horse all day if it taught her a lesson. He hoped she was terrified.

"The lady has a trunk. I'll need to use the wagon and stay overnight. Simon can get the men started in the morning."

Schnitzel nodded, a wry smile playing on his mouth. "Even dead, O'Leary is still causing us grief. Go ahead." He waved Bastien away. "And please, give her what she needs to see her home. The mine will reimburse you."

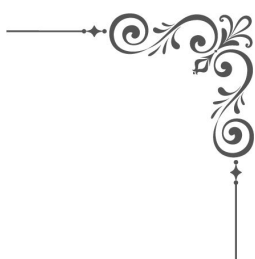
"Yes, sir." Bastien placed his hat back on his head and stepped onto the street. He returned to Della to find her fingers clenched around the saddle horn, despite the practiced calm expression she wore on her face. When the lantern light hit her eyes, they were dark with a silent request to dismount.

"We won't be riding." He reached up. She leaned into him and he gripped her waist pulling her off the horse. A sigh escaped her lips, the air tickling his neck. He shook off the familiar feeling and said, "Unfortunately, the ride will take longer with a wagon. Your trunk is at the store. Find yourself a warmer coat and wait there for me."

She turned to obey but Bastien caught her arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Don't hide again. Be fair."

"Fair?" Her eyebrows shot skyward. Guilt cut through him like barbed wire. As soon as he felt it, he berated himself for his

foolishness. Surely there was more for her to do than work in a brothel. He had no responsibility to this woman. Her suggestion that he marry her was preposterous and only made in distress. She turned away and was out of the stable before Bastien recovered. He led the horses back to the livery. *Please, Lord, don't let her run off again.*



Della



AS THEY DESCENDED INTO the valley, the town disappeared behind rolling hills. Della glanced at Mr. Graham. His broad frame next to her made the bench seem smaller. Earlier, he'd taken one look at her coat, and with a disgusted chuckle, slid his own over her shoulders. The one he now wore was not leather. Instead, it was made of sturdy denim fabric. It wasn't as thick as the one he'd loaned her, and as time passed, her confusion at his generosity grew. She had an odd desire to understand this man.

"So, you don't *want* to marry?" She cocked her head to better view his straight back and handsome profile. "No. That's not it." She narrowed her eyes, "I say you have a girl waiting at home."

"I have a girl at home."

"Ah." Della tried to picture a woman worthy of him. "Is she beautiful?"

Bastien sniffed.

She pressed, "Rich?"

He looked at her sidelong, and Della smiled at her accurate estimation.

"So she's rich and possibly beastly looking, but still preferable to me." Della shifted on the seat, sending up a puff of air from the jacket she wore. It smelled of leather and smoke and a hint of apples. She gave a slow shake of her head and the vanity that swirled in her mind. Her good looks were all she had for herself these days. What good was it to ignore her biggest asset? So it smarted when the man beside her ignored it. Her father always called her worthless with a touch of beauty. Well, she'd been of some value when he'd sold her to Walker Sturgis as payment for gambling debts.

"I'd rather not speak of Angelica."

"Ah, angelic. So she is a beauty." Della sighed. There went her one advantage.

Bastien didn't reply, and she turned her mind to the scenery. The mountain was extraordinary. On her way up to Kirwin, Della was so stressed about what—or who—she would find there that she hadn't taken the time to admire it. The ride was also filled with Bronco's peppering questions regarding who Della was meeting and did she

know single women weren't allowed in Kirwin.

Della sank heavily into the hard seat, disappointed. Ridiculous rules and dead almost-husbands. Nothing had been what she expected, and frankly, she hadn't expected much. Really, she'd just expected the man she'd come to wed to be alive. She'd certainly never expected James to be a man like Bastien. Men of his type didn't place an ad for a wife.

Any time she'd tried to imagine James, Walker's cruelty overtook her thoughts. She shook her head, shutting out the image of him lying on the ground, a pool of blood spreading beneath his head.

She touched her cheek at the memory and gave a barely perceptible wince. Two weeks later and the pain in her tooth hadn't gone. It's probably broken.

Her gaze flicked to Mr. Graham and her eyes roved his profile. "Do you still find it beautiful up here? Or has it grown old?" Walker had found her beautiful once.

His voice was deep, its reverberations rumbling through the bench. "The beauty is the same, but some days I forget to look."

He didn't sound like her picture of a miner. The way he phrased his words, without any twang, revealed his education.

"This is nothing like the gardens back in Omaha. They are planned and varied." And only for the rich. "This...this is something else entirely." She inhaled the crisp air and let it out.

"It's grand and vast."

"Yes."

Amazing how he understood what she'd been thinking even when she didn't. The wagon gave a particularly large jolt and their arms brushed.

A wicked thought popped into her mind. *What if I seduce him?* She needed a husband, and he seemed like someone she could live with. He didn't seem at all violent, not even after she'd argued with him in front of that horse man. Even when he'd gripped her arm to get his point across, it hadn't hurt.

No, no. She could never do something so duplicitous. She wouldn't. She couldn't. "Where are you from? It seems everyone is moving West, but nobody is *from* here."

"Chicago, Illinois."

"Ah, a city boy? Why so far from home?" His jaw clenched. The cold air whipped color into his tanned cheeks.

Bastien shook his head, "Just making my way in the world."

"Me too," she said under her breath. She cleared her throat and raised her voice. "So, no single women? What do the men do all winter?"

He blushed from his neck to his nose.

Della bit her lips and hid a smile.

"Lots of parties and dances," he said. "Mining towns aren't always the most desirable places to live. Boss is trying to make it livable for the families. The schoolteacher is the only single lady, and you can bet she has plenty of suitors."

"But not you."

"Not me," he said, as though the schoolmarm was an old hag who didn't warrant a glance.

"How does one get to be a teacher?"

"Schooling."

"Hmm." Della hadn't attended school since she was seven. When her mother died, she'd taken over most of the household chores. It seemed all she was trained for was marriage. She could cook, clean, and dodge the back of a hand.

Della wrinkled her nose. Ironical to feel grateful to her father. He had raised her to survive. Unfortunately, her husband's hand had proved swifter than her father's.

"D'you like to box?" Della asked.

He gave a start and faced her. His mouth hung open and his eyebrows were drawn together. "What?"

This was the first time he'd looked at her since they were in the wagon. Della tried to shrug off the warmth his gaze left. "You know, where men like to fight each other?"

"I know what boxing is."

"Well, why did you ask me what it was?"

"I didn't." He looked heavenward. "I don't box, though I have watched a match or two."

"Did you like it? Watching someone else get knocked around?" She thought of Walker.

Bastien's lips moved as though he was searching for words. Finally, he pressed them tight and breathed through his nose. "I think I'll water the horses here."

They had been following a river as they made their way down the mountain. Even when they couldn't see it, she could hear the water rushing over the rocks behind the trees. Bastien pulled the wagon to a stop just as the horses' hooves touched the water. The wagon shifted and creaked as Bastien climbed to the ground.

Della swung her legs over the side of the wagon to follow him. It was a long way down, but there was a step, wasn't there? Yes, she remembered it from town and he'd used it just now. But where was it? It was tiny, smaller than her foot, and if she could just find it within the folds of her skirts, she'd be fine. Ah. There it was. She placed her whole weight on the step. And missed. Her knees hit the ground first, and she tumbled with a groan. Blood welled from a scrape on her

hand, and tears gathered on her lashes. She cursed, brushing away the debris. "I'm so sorry." She stood and examined the cuff of his jacket. Guilt plagued her over the gouge that revealed the lighter leather underneath. "I can fix it when we get to town." She glanced at him, ready to dodge a blow.

He stepped close, the breeze carrying his scent. It was much stronger and slightly different coming from him instead of from the jacket. He smelled like...warmth. "Are you okay?" He took her hand and turned it over, surveying the marks on it.

She flinched. "It's nothing. Your sleeve took most of it." Della slid her hand from his tender fingers. She surveyed the top of his head, and her heart gave one loud beat in her chest.

"Why didn't you ask me to help you? I didn't know you wanted down."

Della scoffed. "Obviously, I didn't think I was going to fall out of the darn thing."

Bastien pressed his lips together, but his face betrayed him.

"You're laughing at me." Della scowled and turned to the wagon, blood heating her cheeks. She placed her foot carefully this time, though getting in was a sight easier than getting out. Bastien's hands gripped her waist to assist her, his fingers almost touching in the front. She tensed at his close proximity and something asleep inside her opened one eye.

She scrambled in and adjusted her skirts to make room for him to sit beside her. "So, mining? Do you like it?"

Bastien gave a hard laugh. "Nobody likes mining, but the pay is decent and..."

"What?" Della urged, hoping his words would distract her from whatever creature was waking inside her.

"My family owns a mine in Montana. I'm learning the trade to take over some day."

"Why aren't you working *there* to learn?" His family owned a mine. Now she understood how he had a rich woman at home.

He gave a harumph, and Della guessed this must be a sore topic.

"My father doesn't want me mining at all. When I came out here and showed no inclination of returning to Chicago, he offered a deal. If I work my way up on merit, he'll gift me the larger portion of shares in our family mine. I can manage it or be a silent owner like him."

"So, how long until you've earned the gift of those shares?"

"This latest mining accident meant I made my way to the last position earlier than any of us thought possible. I've reached the last checkpoint. Come spring, I can head to the family mine in Montana."

The wind howled as they continued their way to town. The incessant breeze chapped her dry lips even as she tried to lick

moisture back into them.

When the draft became unbearable she turned her head, trying to find the angle that provided the most protection from the dogged beating of the coming storm. Finally, she touched her nose to Bastien's arm. When he leaned in as though offering himself as cover, she closed her eyes. Thoughts of what she would do when morning came tried to cycle in her head, but she pushed them away focusing instead on gratitude at the warm form beside her.

She was lucky someone as clean-cut as Bastien was taking her down the mountain, even if it was against her will. Her mind flashed to the bounty hunter she'd seen at a train depot on her way to Meeteetse. He was hauling a ragged-looking gentleman into a wagon. She suppressed a shudder at the memory. When her eyes closed, her mind flashed to her journey to Meeteetse, before she'd met Bronco. A man with the dirtiest beard Della had ever seen was hauling another rather ragged-looking gentleman onto a wagon.

"Don't look too close, dearie," an old woman chided, her gray hair quivering as she shook her head. "That's Martin Greiner. He'll arrest anyone just to haul them to the nearest courthouse to see if there's a bounty on their head. I heard tell he's the meanest man this side of the Mississippi."

Della suppressed a shudder. He wasn't the only bounty hunter in these parts. If they were as well-traveled as they seemed, she had best keep her head down until she made it to Kirwin.

"We're here." Bastien's voice cut into her memory.

Della opened her eyes and took a sharp breath as the wagon lurched to a stop. Her tooth ached in sharp protest of the cold air she sucked in as she looked up to see the very hotel she'd left this morning.

She dropped her chin and closed her eyes. What a waste.

Della placed her hands on Bastien's shoulders as he lifted her from the wagon. She rested her cheek near his, so close that his stubble grazed her skin. Her stomach swirled with anticipation and she closed her eyes, wishing she could lean into his arms and linger in his embrace.

Now that she was back in Meeteetse, her lack of a plan felt like hands around her neck, squeezing tighter with every breath.

The wind howled through the darkened streets of Meeteetse. Bastien placed a warm hand between Della's shoulders and ushered her into the hotel.

After checking-in to the same hotel she'd left several hours ago, the owner led a humiliated Della to her same room. She stood numb and heavy before the closed door.

Bastien cleared his throat. "I'll have your trunk brought up and

leave funds at the front desk. Do ... ah ... do you need anything else?"

She needed everything he refused to give her. "No."

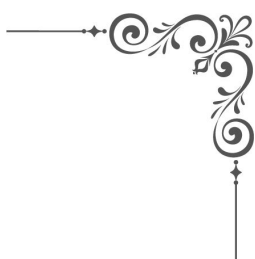
He shoved a hand through his hair. "Fine, then. Well, stay safe, Miss Della."

She didn't watch him leave but felt the loss of his warmth as the scuff of his boots on the wood floor disappeared down the hall. She found just enough strength to open the door and fall onto the bed. Her raw face burned from the exposure to wind and sun. Her tongue scraped over the scabs on her lips. She had barely turned down the lantern when she fell fast asleep.

A loud thump startled her awake. She sat up, her heart racing. One glance at the window told her it was night. But how soon until morning? She crawled out of bed and made her way to the window. Snow fell, silent and calm, a contradiction to the storm that raged inside her. The mine's wagon was still out front, with half a load covered with canvas.

Bastien must still be in town. How close was he? Asleep in this very hotel? She sighed and lifted her face to the stars. They looked like tiny stitches on a midnight quilt. It didn't matter how near Bastien was. He might as well be as far away from her as those stars. If only he had wanted a wife.

She crossed her arms and the swish of fabric drew her gaze. She still wore his jacket. It was no wonder she couldn't drive him from her thoughts, not with his apple-pie smell enveloping her dreams. With a shiver, she climbed back onto the bed and lay on her back. The knots in the ceiling's wood planks were like their own constellations and occupied her until the first rays broke the morning sky, shining a light on the life she could never have.



Bastien



BASTIEN FINISHED HIS breakfast and was sipping his second cup of coffee. His gaze flicked up the stairs and through the railing to the door of Della's room. He wasn't waiting for her. He was only curious why she slept so late. Ivete and his mother were always dressed and ready by the time Bastien and his brothers came to breakfast.

"Ain't seen your lady friend this morning. Must have worn her out taking her down the mountain so late last night."

Bastien flushed. "It wasn't my idea."

"I'll be sure to give her a nice meal 'fore she heads out."

Bastien looked at his empty plate. "All right." He pinched his hat off the tabletop and gave one last glance at Della's door before turning his back and walking out.

He tore out of town towards Kirwin at a pace that sent his teeth chattering and his head pounding. Large flakes of snow fell around him, dusting the horses like scones from a cafe. Bastien brushed the powdery stuff off his arms as the wagon wheels crunched their way along the icy road. Not another soul was out. The isolation brought comfort. Alone was what he deserved. The reason he'd chosen such a cold and lonely mountain on which to prove himself. Not just to his father, but to himself.

The elevation increased and the snow thickened, until the white of the mountain slopes blended with the white of the sky and he could no longer see the fields that stretched along the road. He snapped the reins, and the horses picked up pace again. Kirwin sat at over nine-thousand feet elevation, and the closer he got, the more treacherous the road became.

Steam rose from the horses as they worked to pull the wagon through the dense snow. Bastien pulled the team to a stop and set the brake at the same place Della had fallen. The horses dipped their heads to drink while he glanced at the sky. The storm's white-gray clouds hid the sun and dipped lower toward the dark tree tops.

He turned to study the route back toward Meetetse. The white expanse spread pristine before him, his recent tracks covered as though he had never met Della or made the trip to return her. Not even he would dare traverse the road at this point.

Della wouldn't be making her way up here again. Disappointment settled in his gut. He shook the feeling away. The last thing he needed was a distraction. The sooner he put in his time, the sooner he would be done working for Schnitzel.

Movement in the back of the wagon caught Bastien's eye, and he reached under the seat for his rifle.

A dark head appeared from underneath the canvas covering the supplies.

"Della." He growled. Like a burr in his boot, he couldn't seem to get rid of this woman.

Della turned to face Bastien. "Wha..."

He flipped the canvas covering the back of the wagon, revealing the contents of her trunk arranged in a nest. The trunk itself was nowhere in sight.

Her cheeks flushed with warmth. At least she'd not been freezing the whole time. Fool woman. He wanted her gone, not dead of frostbite.

"Aren't we in Kirwin?" She looked around, no doubt noticing they were surrounded with trees and not buildings.

Bastien's ears burned with frustration. "What are you thinking? This is a blizzard. Do you want to be stranded up here?"

Her guilty face was his answer.

He stepped closer and gripped the side of the wagon. "What can you possibly do in Kirwin? Single women aren't allowed."

"Surely that's just a silly rule."

"No!" He exploded. "Henry Schnitzel is unmovable on the subject. He will send us down this mountain, and can't you see?" He threw his hands towards the white valley. "It's a miracle I made it this far. Nobody could traverse down this slope in this storm, not even Bronco Nell herself."

He let out a huff and ground his teeth.

Della stiffened. "There are seven brothels in Meeteetse. Seven. Do you think that's a town with honest work for a single woman?" Her voice sounded small, almost scared.

"You didn't need to stay *there*. I gave you plenty of money to make your way anywhere in the United States." Money wasted now, as it had no owner to collect it. He clenched his fists, trying to control himself while still getting through to this willful woman. "Have you listened to a word anyone has said since yesterday?"

She glowered at him. "Nobody listens to *me*. Why should I listen to anyone else?"

"No. Single. Women. In. Kirwin." He spoke the words as though she were a degenerate.

She lifted herself to her knees in the bed of the wagon, bringing

her copper eyes level with his.

"Then make me *not* single."

Bastien furrowed his brow. "You're asking me to marry you?" His scornful laugh reverberated through the air.

She lifted a shoulder as though it was a normal question.

"Why would I marry you? Besides, I don't know you. You could be some crazy woman running all over the country asking men to marry you." Though, he admitted to himself, a woman like her shouldn't have to ask more than once. He shook his head dislodging the temptation of her beauty. "Besides I have other plans."

"Yes. The very rich and beautiful Angelica. What does she want with a miner?"

He sliced his hand through the air and turned. "I'm not a miner." He removed his hat and dragged a hand through his hair, setting it down again and tugging the band tighter. Though the wind was freezing, his neck burned. There was something she wasn't telling him. Some reason she couldn't just go back from wherever she came.

When he faced her again, he blinked. Snowflakes glittered in her hair and covered her shoulders where an extra dress was draped over them like a shawl. She looked like a Christmas queen, though her eyes showed a desperation that royalty didn't experience. Not many men would be arguing as he was. James would have been the luckiest man if he hadn't been so unlucky to have died before Della arrived.

"What if we just *told* Mr. Schnitzel we were married," she ventured. "We could have wed last night."

He narrowed his eyes. She was a cunning little thing. He'd be afraid if he wasn't a bit impressed. "And what then? You'd have to live with me. After this blizzard, the pass won't be open again until February."

"You said you couldn't make it through this blizzard anyways. Either way, we're not getting down before then."

Bastien glanced over his shoulder at the road to Meeteetse, giving a large sigh. He twisted in his seat with a frown as snow swirled between them. The weather was getting worse, and the time they'd spent arguing meant the rest of the ride into Kirwin would be difficult.

He shook his head. "This won't work."

"It will. I'll be a good wife." Her pleading eyes searched his. "And you said you wanted to be done here by spring. We can both move on. I just need time to make a plan. Just until the snow melts."

So no family to help her plan. No wonder she wouldn't return home. She had no home. An image of his sister Ivete popped into his mind. He tried not to go there, but the notion of her alone on a mountainside with some man, desperate and no one to turn to ... the walls keeping him safe from Della crumbled. Bastien growled. Della's

situation must have been drastic to move away from everything she knew for the promise of marriage to a stranger. "Is it such a great dream of yours to marry a miner?"

Her eyes twinkled. "A great dream."

He rolled his eyes and climbed into the seat, watching her over his shoulder. Her wild hair blew in the wind as a flag atop a hill. Her clothes were puddled around her, and her eyes held a sparkle he couldn't share. She may have gotten her way, but he wasn't sure which of them was the crazier one. With a snap, he urged the horses up the mountain. He spoke over his shoulder. "We were married in Cody. Meeteetse doesn't have a preacher."

She leaned across the bags of beans and placed a hand on his back to whisper, "Thank you." There wasn't an ounce of jest in her tone.

"At least I get my coat back." He spoke into the wind, not caring if she heard him. He drove the team through the numbing snow, dragging them both closer to an impossible situation. A fake marriage to a stranger, a helpless woman. There'd been other helpless women in his past, those he should have helped and couldn't. By agreeing to her plea, he atoned for a sliver of his past sins, removed one small brick in that wall he'd built, closing him off from society, keeping him on this lonely mountain away from those he loved.

The workday was in full swing when they arrived. Schnitzel stood outside his office, a smoking pipe hanging from the side of his mouth. The buttonholes on his silk vest stretched across his paunch.

"All that time and you didn't reach Meeteetse."

Bastien set the brake and leapt down from the wagon. "Sir, I'd like you to meet my wife, Mrs. Della Graham."

"Well, I'll say. Congrats, you two." He slapped him on the back and gave Bastien a smile around the pipe gripped in his teeth. Bastien led him away from Della. They needed to speak in private.

Schnitzel lowered his voice. "Got yourself a looker."

Resentment at Schnitzel's disrespect rolled through Bastien, ending in his hands which curled into fists. Not that she *was* his wife, but coveting another man's wife was against the rules.

"Take the day and the weekend for your honeymoon, but I want you ready to go by Monday morning."

"Oh, I don't need a honeymoon." Bastien tried not to let his desperation seep into his voice. He didn't want to be stuck with the woman for three long days, though that would be exactly what was expected of him.

"I insist." Schnitzel nodded towards Della, his lips twisted up in a lewd smile, his eyes bright with lust. "If I had a pretty young thing like that in my bed, I'd—"

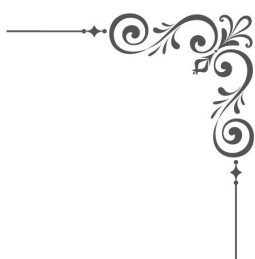
"Thank you, sir," Bastien ground out, cutting him off and tipping

his hat. He jumped from the porch, his boots punching through the soft snow, and strode to the wagon where he placed a hand on Della's arm. Her eyes widened as he pulled her closer. When her gaze met Bastien's, she glanced down, the picture of the cooperative wife she promised to be.

We'll see how long that lasts. Bastien cut a single glance at Schnitzel, keeping his hand locked around Della's arm, keeping her body protectively, possessively close.

Schnitzel averted his eyes. Good. He understood Bastien's message. No more coveting.

Bastien released Della and led the horses to the General Store where he sold Tewksbury the supplies. Then he continued on to his house where he unloaded his wife and her trunkless pile of clothes.



Della



DELLA STOOD ALONE IN what would be her new home for the next several months. She should be anxious to explore the space, yet she couldn't tear her gaze from her clothes. A heap of lace and canvas puddled in the middle of the floor. Hot tears rimmed her eyelids, threatening to wet her cheeks. If he saw her tears, he'd know. She was no iron-willed adventurer who made men do as she pleased. She was lost and alone and her toothache was resonating in her jaw. This man had a life, and she'd upset it without thought for anyone except herself.

With blurry eyes, she made her way to the bed. She sat heavily on the red and blue quilt. Its softness called to her, but she denied it. Instead, her shoulders sagged, and she dropped her head into her hands. He hadn't raged at her. If he'd hit her, at least she could steel herself with righteous indignation. She scowled at the dresser they were to share, as though it were the enemy. Now she was expected to push his things out of the way and force herself further into his life.

Along the far wall stood a table and four chairs, crudely crafted, but sturdy. She'd fold her clothes there. When he returned he could give her whatever space he liked. She wouldn't ask for, or take, anything more.

As she folded all the clothing items her aunt had given, the scent of rosemary and lavender reminded her of the day they'd packed her trunk. A pang of homesickness caught her by surprise. When she came to her aunt for help, she hadn't seen her in years. Instead of catching up, they spent the day planning Della's departure and tailoring her aunt's old clothes to Della's height. After folding the last item, she laid it on the tidy stack.

The door latch clicked. Bastien stepped inside, shaking off the snow and stamping his boots on the rug.

Without a word, he took three long strides to the wood box. Turning with an armful of lumber and a box of matches, he knelt in front of a cast iron stove. He opened the door with a creak and piled the kindling and logs into its big belly. With a scratch he lit a match. The flames caught easily on the dry timber.

He sat on his haunches and warmed his hands. Della watched the

flames dance over his shoulder, the weight of what she'd done settling into her belly, churning like bad meat.

She closed the gap between them, intending to lay a hand on his broad shoulder.

But he stood and faced her. "I'll make some space in the dresser." He stomped across the hollow floor, hauled an armful of clothing out of the dresser, and dropped them onto the bed to his left.

"Stop. Please." Della's voice shook. "I'm sorry. This was a terrible idea."

He peered at her from under heavy lids. "That *just* occurred to you? The terrible idea began when you answered an ad for a wife." He shook his head and continued moving clothing.

"Stop." She touched his forearm, hoping to still his wild movements. "I don't need any space in the dresser. I can just"—she turned, but there was nowhere else to put her things—"put them on the floor."

He shook off her hand. "Don't be ridiculous. The mice would chew right through them."

He stepped around her and squatted before the drawers under the bed, yanking them open and tumbling his clothes inside. Della winced at the crumpled mess those clothes would become if left in that state. She knelt beside him but didn't dare touch him again. Agitation rolled off him in waves. Instead, she stayed by his side and sent him an apologetic look, her eyes large and her mouth unsmiling.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He closed the drawer with a thud and met her gaze for the first time that afternoon. "I've been granted a honeymoon." His misery sounded like her father when their cupboards were empty and he had gambled away all their food money. "We better figure out more than just being married in Cody. The women will start coming by soon."

Della closed her eyes and tried to keep her heart from pounding out of her chest. He had the right of it. If anyone could ferret out a farce, it would be a bunch of bored, married women looking for gossip. Her stomach twisted at the thought, then gave a loud rumble. She placed her hand over the noise, she hadn't eaten since supper the previous night. "Can I ..." She pointed toward the kitchen.

"Help yourself." He shrugged. "If you need anything, please use Tewsbury's store. I have an account there. He's fair and closest."

"Okay," she said from the kitchen, pulling out flour and soda for biscuits.

As she worked, he arranged her things in the dresser. The table was clear when she placed a plate of hot biscuits in front of him.

"I wish you had some grease for gravy. Plain will have to do until I can get things set up."

"I usually eat in the restaurant. You won't find much in the way of cooking supplies. There's some jelly on the third shelf." He nodded towards the cupboard.

She found the jelly and placed it on the table with a spoon. "You aren't the first man who can't cook, and you won't be the last. While I'm around that won't be a problem." Della nodded, confident in her ability to please him, at least in that way.

"Please, sit." His voice softened as he eyed her from where he stood behind one of the chairs. His hands gripped the back of the chair and he leaned toward the food inhaling the scent.

She stood at the end of the table, waiting for him to seat himself first. Walker used to see red if the food was gone before he was full. She would always wait until he was finished to have her meal. "Oh, that's fine. You eat up, I want you to be satisfied." Della set a glass of milk on the table.

"Della, please join me."

His voice was stern enough that Della sat with an obedient thump.

A wry smile twisted his lips. "Glad to see you can follow orders. Now eat."

Della narrowed her gaze. *Orders*. She wrestled with the want to please him and the desire to please herself by refusing him. Her stomach grumbled and hunger won.

Bastien finished a biscuit and plucked another from the plate. "Okay, I need your story."

Della's gaze flashed to his face. She hadn't considered what to tell him. She heaved a sigh. The truth would have to do in a pinch. "I'm from Omaha."

"And your family?" He raised his eyebrows as though she were daft at having withheld this information.

"My mom is with the angels for these eleven years. My father is the meanest man alive." True only because her husband no longer counted among the living.

Bastien blinked.

"My little brother is fifteen, and the sooner he gets out of my father's house, the better. His mother, my step-mother, is dead, too." She spooned jelly on her biscuit and gave a wry smile. "I reckon my father's wives would rather be in the ground than under his roof."

"I see." Bastien's voice was guarded and Della checked her criticism of men. No man wanted to hear her opinions.

"And you? Besides being from Chicago with a rich sweetheart of course."

"Don't speak of her."

Della set her silverware on the table. A wave of respect overwhelmed her. This was a man who protected his own. She'd been

with to stick herself to him, even if it was temporary.

“As you wish, husband.”

His face took on a look of annoyance, and Della buttoned her lips.

He swabbed a biscuit in the pool of jelly on his plate. “My family lives in Chicago. As I said yesterday, I’ve left to pursue the business of mining. My family thinks me mad, but the longer I stay away, the less I care.”

“Yesterday you mentioned shares. Do you have shares in *this* mine?” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder towards the street.

“No. This belongs to Mr. Kirwin and Mr. Adams. I’m only an employee. My wage comes bi-monthly like the rest.”

“But you make more, because you’re the foreman.”

“Yes.”

Della chewed her lip, considering. “So you can afford things like meat?”

“Yes.” His short response was cautious.

“I was only thinking, a honeymoon deserves a proper meal.”

Bastien didn’t take the bait.

Della would have to convince him. “If we are going to be shut up in here all weekend long, can’t I make you a decent meal?”

“You aren’t leaving this house until I know we have our stories straight.” He eyed her. “And Father, brother, Omaha doesn’t count as information. They would never believe we wed with such little knowledge.”

Della tossed her head. “People often marry with less knowledge.”

“Only when it is arranged. This”—he bobbed his head towards the door—“is a small community. I have no doubt every person here knew of our nuptials the minute I walked into this house from unloading the wagon.”

“Well, I don’t need a script to know why a girl like me would fall in love with a man like you.” She waved an upturned palm in his direction. “You are handsome, kind, and have one of the best paying jobs in the town. No woman will wonder why *I* up and married *you*.”

A flush crept up Bastien’s neck.

Warm satisfaction enveloped Della at his response. She’d made him flush. The knowledge made her feel powerful. “Now, as for why you married me ... were you and James close?”

“Not close enough for him to tell me he’d ordered himself a wife.”

“Enough that you would take on his responsibilities? What if I didn’t have a family to return to? Is that believable?”

Bastien bobbed his head to one side. “Possibly.” He considered for a moment, then sighed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “But like you said, my family has money. Why wouldn’t I have just funded your living in town?”

“You mentioned the lack of single women. Maybe you couldn’t bear another winter without the pleasures of Meeteetse.” She cleared her throat, uncomfortable with the mention of pleasures. She didn’t yet know what this whole endeavor would cost her.

Bastien shook his head. “I wasn’t one of the men to frequent the brothels. It will have to be that I fell in love with you.”

She resisted the urge to call him a dummy. “Well, of course, they have to believe you fell in love with me. Otherwise, all this”—she motioned a hand between them—“is for nothing.”

He ran a hand over his face, his whiskers scratching against his palm. “I just have a reputation for having a cool head. I’m not the kind of guy who marries a woman he just met.”

“I’ll just have to make myself irresistible. You leave that to me.” She nodded. “I can be charming.”

Bastien harrumphed.

Della narrowed her eyes. “Why is it that you men can have the worst of manners, yet we *still* marry you?” Is it so impossible that a man would want to marry her? She resisted the urge to walk to the looking glass.

“I don’t have bad manners,” he stated, as though he was the judge. “You haven’t exactly been pleasant since we’ve met. More like a rattlesnake. I’m afraid to put my toes down. Who knows which one you’ll bite next.”

Della’s lips curved into a satisfied smile. “That changes today. I am very appreciative of your hospitality, Mr. Graham, and I will do my best to make sure you don’t regret taking me in.”

Bastien glanced out the window where the sun dipped beneath the horizon. He stood to light the lantern.

Della plucked his boots from where they lay and stood them along the wall by the door. “Did you share a cabin before? It seems lonely here.”

“I don’t mind the solitude.” He shrugged with one shoulder. “I usually read a bit before going to bed early.”

Della glanced at the bed, noting how small it was. The only other furniture was the wooden table and chairs.

He must have seen her gaze. “I have more blankets.” He jutted his chin towards the shelf that ran along the wall above the bed. It had three blankets rolled tight and bound with cord. “I can make myself a bed in front of the stove.”

“Oh, no. *I’ll* sleep on the floor.” Della rose from the table, arching her back as she stood. She’d slept in her corset last night. Thank the heavens she’d be removing it soon. Even on the floor, a night’s rest was welcome.

Bastien stepped in front of her and pulled the blankets into his

arms. She eyed his tall frame. Surely he stood more than six feet tall.

She took a blanket from him and squatted to unroll it in front of the stove, spreading it perpendicular to his bed. "I can't picture you down inside a mine"

"No?" He dropped the other two blankets.

She opened up the two to use as covers. "You're too tall. I thought mine shafts were small and the men working them had to be small enough to fit."

"Well, a few inches doesn't make much difference."

"You've got at least six inches on that store manager."

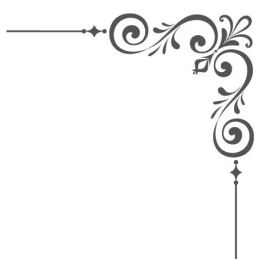
Bastien chuckled. "Maybe I can convince Tewksbury to trade jobs with me."

Della stood, hands on her hips. "This will do nicely. I think I'll have the coziest spot in the house."

"You'll not be sleeping on the floor."

Della opened her mouth to protest and remembered her promise to be charming. "Yes, husband."

She could tell by his narrowed eyes she wasn't fooling him. She would have to make it believable. If he didn't believe her, others wouldn't either.



Bastien



A SLANT OF SUNSHINE spilled morning heat through the window and across Bastien's face. He didn't open his eyes, but he'd been awake for hours, cursing the hard floor and his aching muscles. He sat up with a groan and rolled his neck. Twenty-eight wasn't old, yet he remembered his grandfather's complaints of aches and pains every morning.

This was going to be a long winter. He stood and walked to the ewer to splash water on his face. Maybe Tewksbury had a mattress in his back room. And if he did, could Bastien purchase one without raising any alarms? He snorted. In this small town? Not likely.

He made his way back to his makeshift bed, curled the blankets into a tight roll, and tied them with the twine. When he opened the stove to add more wood, the handle gave a loud creak. The still form of Della jolted, and her head lifted from the pillow. He watched with amusement as her eyes flashed around the room, disoriented, and eventually landed on him. With a breath, she relaxed, her head dipping slightly, but not meeting with the pillow again.

Bastien used a stick to poke a log into place. "You talk in your sleep."

"What?" she said through a yawn. She stretched her arms toward the ceiling, and Bastien averted his gaze from her nightdress. He could never explain this situation to Angelica. He would have to blot it completely from his history.

He poked the log again. "You cried out several times last night. Was it a nightmare?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, scrunching her face in thought. "I don't remember a dream at all. What did I say?"

Bastien shook his head. "Couldn't make anything out, just mumblings and the occasional shout."

"Oh dear." She bit her lip, her face remorseful.

"It's nothing. Would you like to get breakfast at the cafe? Saturdays are always busy, and the town will be eager to meet you."

Della gulped so loud, they could hear her over the mountains. "I know I said I could be charming, but I'm not sure I'm ready."

"No problem." He tried to keep his voice light and convey the

truth of his statement. There was no rush, and the thought of the town brought the image of a hungry pack of wolves.

“But what will they think?”

Bastien gave a low chuckle. “I’d rather not dwell on what they’re thinking.”

Della’s cheeks flushed.

Just how much did she know about married women? His knowledge came from the ladies at the club, but he prayed Della was never forced so low. While she seemed capable and determined, when she’d slept, her face relaxed, and she seemed younger than he originally estimated.

He closed the door to the stove and stood, stretching. “Just how old are you?”

Della gave a theatrical gasp and placed her fingertips on her chest. “Why, Bastien, darling, you should never ask a woman her age.”

“You’re not a woman. You’re my wife.”

“Actually, I’m *not* your wife.” She tossed her head. “This is all just pretend, so I can be any age you’d like.”

Bastien gave her a hard glare.

She sighed and shrugged off her comical persona. “Why does it matter? If I really were your wife, I would tell you. Am I not allowed any secrets in this game we are playing?”

“No.”

“Then you don’t get to keep your dear Angelica to yourself either.”

Bastien thought he heard a touch of jealousy in her voice.

Della threw off her blankets and slid off the bed and onto the floor. Her bare feet pattered on the wood floor until they were almost toe-to-toe with Bastien’s stockings. “We either get secrets, or we don’t. You can’t have it both ways.” She stared at him with fire in her eyes, her neck arched. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need a moment of privacy.”

Bastien walked away from her, a bit colder with every step. He stepped onto the porch, giving her the privacy she requested, same as the night before.

Is she jealous of Angelica? Bastien tried to conjure Angelica’s face. More than a year had passed since the last time they saw one another. He’d returned home for a month in the summer. The city was as loud as ever and filled with people who had expectations of him. Even Angelica had been shocked that he was returning to the mine instead of ‘giving up this foolish notion.’ He could never tell her the real reason he couldn’t do city life, not without losing her.

He shook his head at the memory. Sometimes he wanted to forget, but he had to remember, even if it pained him. Memories were his own version of self-flagellation. When his father deemed him old

enough, he introduced Bastien to an exclusive club. There, he spent money on gambling and women as though it was endless, which as a Graham in Chicago was almost true.

Della rapped on the window pulling him from those years of self-serving and back to the present where he was trying to help just one woman in need. At her gesture he stepped back inside.

The warm air enveloped him, and he strode closer to the stove so it could chase away the lingering cold. "Nobody is out, but we can't keep doing that, stepping out for the other to change. Folks will notice."

Della smoothed the front of her skirt. "Married people argue. Let them think what they want."

"Did your father stand on the porch twice a day when things got tough?"

"You don't want to know what my father did to my mother when he was dissatisfied."

Bastien froze, alarmed by her callous comments about her own father. Last night he'd been too tired and too irritated to think much on her words about her father, but they came back to him now, and he couldn't ignore them. "Did he ever harm you or your brother?"

Della cocked her head, much like a small bird surveying something new to the woods. "Did your father *never* lay hands on you?"

Bastien was the middle of three boys. Getting beat on was something he was familiar with, but never by his father. "He was much too busy to tend to us when we were children."

Della picked at her nails, not meeting his gaze. "Do you think the back of a hand counts as 'tending'?"

"Of course not." He shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the wall.

She moved her curious eyes to him. "I think you'll be a good father."

The compliment shocked him speechless. She had this way of bringing up a topic, and he had no idea how she'd gotten there.

"Biscuits again, my darling, or shall I run to the store for some bacon?"

"Biscuits, please." He had been near starving when they'd arrived in town, but hers had been the best biscuits he'd ever eaten.

She turned and began the work of gathering ingredients.

Bastien leaned against a wall, appreciating her confident movements around his kitchen. "You'll find picking up bacon isn't as easy as it was in Omaha. Too many bears in these woods to keep a large meat locker. The general store carries some smoked meats, and every so often, Schnitzel authorizes a deer hunt. We have one planned in a few weeks for Thanksgiving."

“Oh?” she asked, distracted. She had finished stirring and started pinching off rounded sections of the dough and placing them on the cooking sheet. “Do you hunt? Or is the foreman too busy for such pleasures?”

“I’ll go, though I’m not nearly the best shot. Most of these boys have been living off the land all their lives.”

“And you?”

“Me?”

“Where did a city boy learn to shoot?”

“Ah.” He pushed himself off the wall and filled two cups with water, placing them on the table. “My grandparents had a home in the country. My father blames them for this bout in the country, says they let me play cowboys and Indians too often.”

“I thought your moving west was *his* idea.”

“No. I came here on my own. It wasn’t until I’d been here almost a year that he couldn’t stand me working for someone else and laid out the offer regarding shares in our family mine.”

He took a long pull from his cup of water. “This ...” He made a circle with his finger to encompass everything around them. “He considers a punishment. What he really wants is for me to settle into the family business.” Bastien sighed, remembering the unspoken pressure inside his parents’ Chicago home. “The reason he wants me working for him is precisely the reason I want to be on my own.”

“And what is that reason?”

“We are similar when it comes to drive and ambition.”

“He must be proud of you, even if you are rejecting him.”

“I’m not rejecting him.” Bastien paced as Della slid the pan into the oven. She used the back of her hand to itch under her eye and left a smudge of flour on her cheek. Her dress had flour on it as well. “Don’t you have something to put over your clothes?”

“I left home in a bit of a hurry. An apron wasn’t on my mind.”

“Why did you leave? Was it your father?” Something inside Bastien stirred at the thought of a father hurting his child badly enough to drive her away in such desperate haste.

“I wasn’t safe,” she whispered, washing her hands in the ewer.

Bastien fought the urge to go to her, rooting his feet to the floor. “What would you have done had James been old or ugly?”

“I wasn’t marrying for love.” She waved him away as though this notion were foolish. “I told you, a woman can’t make her way alone in this world. At least not a woman like me.”

“What do you mean a woman like you?” *Fiery? Brave? Witty?*

“Even Bronco Nell was left a few heads of cattle when her husband disappeared.” She shook her head. “When I left Omaha, all I had was a broken tooth and a black eye.”

“You have a broken tooth?” Bastien strode forward, intent on inspecting her mouth.

She reared her head away and set her eyebrows in a glare. “It’s fine. I just eat on the other side.”

“You could get an infection, and it must pain you a great deal.”

“Only when it’s cold.” Della lifted her shoulder, turning to open the oven and dip her head down to see inside.

Bastien dropped his chin, his voice flat. “It’s winter in Wyoming. You’re going to be cold for the next six months.”

“Six? I thought you said you would be out of here by spring.”

“October isn’t even through yet. Spring around here is practically June.”

Her jaw dropped.

“I’m not saying we have to stay for that long, but we should make a plan.”

Della walked around and sank into the chair. “I thought you said a decent thaw would come in February.”

“Yes, it *should*. Maybe sooner, maybe later. I can’t say for sure. I think I can be done here by June for sure.”

Della raised her eyebrows. “That’s more than six months.” She let out a nervous huff. “I didn’t realize just how much I was asking of you.” She leaned forward, resting her chin on her fist and surveying him. “Why *did* you say yes? Was it just because you were afraid to try and go back down the mountain?”

“I wasn’t afraid.” Bastien bristled. “You should be grateful and not questioning.” He shifted in his seat. Why couldn’t he voice, even to himself, why he’d agreed to her fool scheme?

His movements drew her attention and Bastien swallowed at her inability to miss his discomfort. He swallowed and clasped his hands tightly together on the table.

She reached across the table and rested one smooth palm on his white-knuckled hands.

He lifted his eyes. Hers shone with concern. How had she known he needed comfort? Bastien swallowed and pulled away from her touch.

“You’re right. I don’t need to know. I was only curious.” She leaned into the back of the seat and lay her palms flat on the tabletop. “So, out of here by June, possibly sooner but not before March?”

Bastien nodded. “Sounds about right. Then I’ll be off to Montana and you can go where you’d like.”

She twisted her face in worried contemplation.

“Until then, we feign marriage, starting with the need to fix your broken tooth.”

“I’m fine.” She stood, brushing off his concern and walking to the

oven. "I'm not even cold and you seem to have enough wood to keep the stove lit. You aren't letting me outside anyways." She used a towel to remove the pan from the oven, placing it on the stovetop.

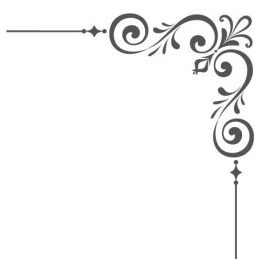
"Not letting—"

"I'm just saying." Her tone was placating, reminding him of his mother. "You don't need to worry about me. I've been through worse." With a tilt of the tray, her quick fingers loosened each biscuit, letting them fall to the plate.

Bastien scoffed. "That doesn't make it any better." He threw his hands into the air. "Just because you have the grit to withstand the pain, doesn't mean you should."

"Hush now and eat some breakfast." She snorted. "You men are all the same—ornery when you don't have a full belly."

Bastien clenched his fists. The woman certainly knew how to dodge the point. And compare him to the other men in her life. From what little he knew, that was no compliment.



Della



WHEN DELLA FINISHED cleaning the breakfast dishes, she found Bastien settled in his armchair with a book. That corner of the cabin had windows on both sides. The armchair was lush and must have been brought from Chicago. Every other piece of furniture in the cabin was built for hard use. The chair was sturdy, but built for comfort. basic and sturdy. It must be his favorite spot. “I have a question, husband.”

He lifted his eyes, keeping his head angled toward his book.

“Might we bundle up and get some fresh air? Even for honeymooners, we are being hermits. Certainly, they are not so deluded as to think we cannot even stop”—her cheeks burned and she swallowed—“and take a walk.”

“Before we do anything, you are going to see the doctor, and you need a decent coat.”

“Doctor?” Della yelped. She’d never seen a doctor in her life. They were too costly for anything that wasn’t dying.

“Yes. I won’t have your tooth aching all winter.” He returned to his book. “As soon as you’re ready, we’ll head out.”

Della opened her mouth and closed it again. She likely resembled a trout. She threw the hand towel onto the counter and placed her hands on her hips. “I’m ready, husband.”

“Great.” He smiled as though he hadn’t noticed the venom in her voice.

Della pulled her shawl over her shoulders. She was already wearing the warmest jacket she’d brought from her aunt’s trunk. As her aunt had outgrown it years before, where it hit Della’s waist was long out of fashion. The longer styles that were current would have provided Della with more warmth, but clothing was a luxury she’d never been able to afford.

Bastien slipped into his heavy sheepskin coat, and she experienced a prick of ownership. She hoped it now smelled of her just as it had of him when she wore it. He opened the door and allowed her to step through first. After setting the latch, he turned to her and tucked her hand into the crook of his arm.

“Wife.” His eyes danced, and she guessed he had heard the tone

she'd used in calling him husband earlier.

The doctor was only a few cabins away. Their place was more extensive than Bastien's, with a wall and doorway that must have led to a bedroom. One wall had two large windows, and in front of it lay a long table. Nearby stood a cabinet, the open door revealing vials most likely filled with medicines. The doctor's much younger wife seemed close to Della's own eighteen years.

The doctor spoke to his wife with soft words, and she was a quick and doting assistant. Della sat on a tall chair and opened her mouth. He checked Della's tooth and turned to face Bastien, "It will have to be pulled."

Della's hand flew to her lips as though her fingers could hold in the tooth he intended to take from her.

"It is broken, though I am curious what caused the break."

Della opened her mouth to answer when Bastien's eyes flicked to hers. She closed her mouth, and he spoke for her. "The reverend served us rock candy after the wedding. I'm afraid that was the cause."

Della eyed Bastien, intrigued at his smooth lie.

The doctor turned and collected a metal tool from the cupboard. "Ah, well, it will be painful, but the sooner we pull it, the sooner she'll be feeling better."

"Can't I keep it?" Della pleaded, her eyes darting between the two men as they discussed her fate.

The doctor's eyes filled with pity, and she fought the urge to spit. In her experience pity was short lived and quickly replaced by resentment. Just one of the many lessons her father had taught her. The women she'd grown up around had tried to help her father, but when he'd resisted their efforts, they'd turned on Della, as if having pity for her would somehow make them victims of the same abuse and poverty they'd been trying to free her from to begin with. Besides, pity made Della's destitution too close for comfort and reminded them that even though they didn't live in the poorest parts of town, they still paid the same amount of rent and weren't much better off.

The doctor's gentle touch on her shoulder jolted her back into the present. "Dear, it will only get worse and eventually infected. Doesn't it hurt a great deal?"

Della remembered how her jaw ached while she lay freezing under Bastien's canvas sheet on the way to Kirwin. She wasn't sure if she'd fallen asleep or passed out from the pain.

The doctor spun and spoke to Bastien. "When would you like me to do it?"

Della leaned around the doc and shook her head at Bastien. *Not yet*, she silently pleaded.

Bastien's gaze met hers before he gave the doctor his full attention. "We have some things to get from the general store. I'd like to have it done today if possible."

"Of course." The doctor put his hands on his hips and rocked back on his heels.

Bastien took her hand, and the warmth of his palms did nothing to still her shaking. He tugged her to her feet and led her through the doorway to the street.

Della pulled away from him. "Gracious, you can't possibly let him pull my tooth. I need it." Her voice cracked as her tongue prodded the broken molar in the back of her mouth.

Bastien patted her hand and pulled her back to his side. "You don't need it because you aren't even using it." He kept his pace, pulling her along when she stumbled. "You heard the man. It will only get worse and possibly infected. Remember, we are without many resources in the mountains. Taking you down the trail for a medical emergency risks both your life and mine."

Della gulped and tightened her grip on his arm as if her hand were an eagle's talon as they stepped through the doors of the general store.

Though snow fell from gray skies, the inside of the shop glowed with warmth. The honey color of the wooden floors, cabinets, and shelves called Della, making her forget her tooth, and urging her to touch their wares. Her fingers twitched when she noticed the bolts of fabric.

Bastien led her to the counter.

Tewksbury stood behind it, his paunch resting against the counter. "Congratulations, you two."

Della flashed him a sweet smile then lowered her lids to let Bastien accept the compliment.

"Thank you. I'm actually here because my wife needs a coat."

"Of course." Tewksbury called over his shoulder, "Sarah!" He turned back to Bastien. "We have many items that will do for a lady."

"I hoped for something custom. Does Sarah have time for a custom order?"

"Time? Of course."

A bedraggled Sarah came from the back room. She brushed away the hair that stuck to her forehead. Her face lit when it fell on Bastien and Della.

"Oh, I was wondering when we'd see you two." She rushed around the counter and placed both hands on Della's forearm, giving it a squeeze. "Congratulations." Her eyes shone as they lingered on Bastien, and Della wondered how many married women in this town were taken with him.

Della nodded, accepting her congratulations as the conversation

turned to the project at hand. When Sarah took Della into the backroom for her measurements, Della's eyes widened. Never had her measurements been taken by anyone except her mother, her step-mother, or herself.

Sarah, a woman whose husband owned such a proper store, was now bending and working for Della. How absurd! Sarah's husband owned a store. He was a proper businessman, and Sarah herself plied a proper trade. Yet here she was, bending at Della's knee, working for Della. Absurd. But ... wasn't this just the sort of treatment, just the sort of life, Bastien's wife would enjoy and expect? Della felt her spine straighten and her chin lift. Well, for now she was Bastien's wife, and having clothes custom made would help her remember that, help her play that role just a little bit better, just a little bit more believably. Once Sarah was done, Della and Bastien bid her farewell and left.

Bastien steered them towards the café.

Panic rose in Della's chest. The café? "I thought we decided not to face the town just yet."

"You need to eat a decent meal before Doc pulls your tooth."

She set her heels and leveled him with a stare. "I'm not having my tooth pulled."

He surveyed her face and gave a curt nod, possibly deciding he didn't want to cause a scene on Main Street. He turned them towards his cabin.

When they entered the cabin, Bastien took her coat and hung it on the wall. She made her way to the stove and stretched out her hands for warmth.

"The tooth has to go." His voice came from behind her. "There is nothing to discuss. I will tend to you afterwards, so you have nothing to fear." He came around so she could see his gentle face, countered by hard arms crossed over his chest.

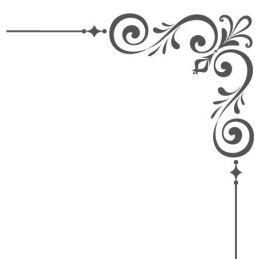
"That doctor only wants your money. Just because it's broken doesn't mean I needed to see a doctor. Broken bones heal just fine without professional assistance."

His brows knit in confusion, then he must have understood her meaning because his eyes widened and he combed his gaze over her frame as though he could identify the bones she'd mended without a doctor's assistance.

His face softened as he spoke. "Teeth don't heal like other bones. It's broken forever. It has to go." He took a step closer as though he wanted to say more.

She ripped her gaze away from his and rolled the anger out of her shoulders. No good. It pooled deep in her guts and sat there like a stone, heavy and cold. But why? He was right. If teeth didn't set like other bones there was no choice but to have this one pulled. Only

Bastien was spending his money on her right and left. First, a tailored coat, then a doctor's fee. It was possible Della had never had this amount of money spent on her in her lifetime. Would she ever be able to repay him or would the benefit of this arrangement be all on her side? Guilt ballooned in her chest. She had no money, but she could repay him in other ways. If he wanted her to lose the tooth, she'd do as he asked. Her gaze fell to the floor and her tongue slid with a sharp pang across her tooth, possibly for the last time. "Yes, husband."



Bastien



DELLA LAY STILL BENEATH a pile of blankets in the increasingly warm cabin. And cried. It was a single tear, but it was enough to tear Bastien's heart in two. He hated women's tears. Didn't every man?

He was by her side, but not soon enough, and the tear disappeared into the white of his pillowcase. He frowned down at her profile when she turned her face away from him. The tea. The doctor had given him a medicinal tea to reduce the swelling and another to help her sleep. He'd prepare it now, but first he kneeled next to the bed. "Does it hurt very bad?"

She didn't answer, and her brows pinched together.

He waited, chewing the inside of his cheek, praying she didn't blame him for the anguish she suffered when it had been her father who broke the darn thing, to begin with.

The question burned in his chest, breaking free before he could stop it. "Do you think me as bad as him?"

She gave a faint shake of her head. A more vigorous nod would have been nice, but it would have to do. Her silky hair had come loose during the surgery and now spread over the pillow. He fought the need to touch it and dropped his eyes before she could read the intention in them.

With a shaky breath, he stood. The mountain air had turned him into a nursemaid. If this were the city, he would probably be taking in stray cats too.

Once the tea had steeped, he brought it to Della.

With a wince she moved into a seated position and reached for the cup with both hands. Bastien leaned over and took the pillow from the other side, stacking them into a soft wall to prop her up, making it easier to drink.

"Thank you." Her voice was rough, as though she hadn't spoken in some time.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "Would you like me to read to you?"

She nodded and bowed her head to take a sip of tea. Her face contorted. "Ugh." Her eyes found his. "That's not good."

Bastien couldn't help but laugh. "I'm sorry." He turned to the

kitchen, "Here, I have honey. Will that help?"

He spooned in a hearty amount.

She tried again, scrunching her face. "A bit better?" She eyed him from over the rim, as though she wanted to spit it back into the cup.

He snickered. "I'm sorry. Doc says it will help. Can you drink it anyway?"

She nodded and took a dutiful gulp.

Bastien plucked *The Count of Monte Cristo* from its place on the arm of his chair and sat. He opened the first page and read aloud.

Soon after she finished her tea, Della fell asleep. Bastien stopped reading and took her mug to the wash bucket. A chuckle found its way out of his throat. Caretaking for a stranger, albeit a beautiful one, was an absurd way to spend a honeymoon. Yet it was perfect for the reality of their situation. Being stuck indoors with her would have been a challenge. Now, he could tend to her, and when she was better, he would be back to work.

A miner's hours were sometimes long. He could continue to keep a clear head if he left when she woke and returned at bedtime. He now paced his cabin while she softly breathed in his bed.

When he banished himself to this mountain, his intention had been to help the opposite sex by removing himself from their sphere. His selfish behavior may have cost a woman her life. If not directly, then the actions of all the men who frequented that club shared the blame. Now here he was, with the chance to help a woman find her life after such upheaval. He watched her laying in his bed, her chest rising and falling. A weight settled on him at the life she'd lived up until now, a life like so many others, filled with pain and heartbreak. It made him embarrassed at how he and his father argued before he left.

Bastien's claims on morality had been humorous to his father. Apparently morals didn't matter when one was as wealthy as the Graham family. Now that Bastien saw some of the other pain in the world, the sadness of an unfaithful spouse was no longer the pinnacle of wrongdoing. Leaving Chicago and refusing to follow his father's path or withdraw his inheritance was meant as a statement to his father's actions. Now it just seemed infantile. Money like that could change anyone's life. If he didn't use it for himself, he could at least spread it around.

Shrugging into his coat, which still smelled like Della, of lavender and rosemary, he closed the door and strode to the general store. After greeting Schnitzel, Bastien asked for Sarah, and the two of them spent some time with their heads together planning the jacket she would make for Della. He stopped by the cafe and ordered dinner. Potato soup for Della, if she was able, and a sandwich for himself.

When he stepped through the door, Della blinked at him. She had

propped herself against the two pillows, her feet stretched out in front of her, and she held his copy of *Mountain Wildflowers* in her hands. "Do all these flowers really grow right here?"

He placed the stoneware and paper-wrapped meal on the table. "Yes. That was written by a man down in Cody."

"I wouldn't think a man would notice." She set the book down and he caught a glimpse of the page she was reading. Purple Asters. She glanced at him as though a thought had just occurred to her. Her eyes sparkled. "Have you seen all these?"

Bastien busied himself with laying out the meal. "Not all, but most. I bet you'll be able to find every one of them once the spring comes. Those Asters are everywhere. They're a type of Daisy whose seeds are spread when they are trampled. You'll love spring on the mountain."

The words had already left his lips when he realized his error. He winced and turned, hoping Della hadn't noticed, and said, "Set that book aside. I have dinner for you. Are you up for some soup?"

"If that is what I smell, then yes."

He smiled at her, glad for her perk. "You might be smelling my sandwich, but you can't have it. I wouldn't mind, but doc said no solid foods for a few days."

Della took the soup with both hands, stretching her neck so her nose hovered over the steam. "Potatoes and bacon." She eyed him. "I thought you said there wasn't bacon up here."

Bastien pulled his chair over. He sat facing her and ate over his lap. "I said it was different. Supplies will be fine for the next month or so. After Christmas, things start to get scarce. I hope you like beans."

"I've cooked with them plenty. I'm sure the women around here will have some fine recipes for when supplies get low." She looked at him sidelong. "If only I weren't under lock and key."

"I see no reason to lock you in. You've been perfectly contained thus far."

"That's because you took my tooth." She spoke, dabbing some soup off her lips with her napkin.

He used his earlier ruminations as ammunition. "The tooth had to go. What better time for you to have a procedure than when I'm here to care for you?" She opened her mouth, but he cut in. "You can't possibly be mad about it."

She closed her lips, but he could tell her mind was saying all the things words couldn't. After they finished their meal in silence, Della threw the blankets off and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Her hair had seemed to grow and stuck out of her head at odd angles.

Bastien lifted her legs and gently laid her back on the bed, tucking the covers around her. "Oh, no, you don't. I'll do the cleaning." He walked the dishes back to the cafe.

When he returned, she was sitting against the headboard again, but without the book. She grinned a greeting at him. "Will you tell me about your life?"

"What do you want to know?" He kneeled, adding a log to the stove, and calculated the amount of wood needed to warm his cabin all day. Before Della, there was no need to worry about it. Timber wasn't scarce, but every man chopped and stocked his own wood.

"About your family. You've only really talked about your father. Tell me about your brothers and sister."

Bastien brewed her another cup of tea and pulled a chair close. "Once Ivete came along, everyone was so glad to have a girl that she became quite spoiled." He smiled a dimple blinking in his cheek. "Whoever marries her is going to have a time keeping her happy. He better be rich."

The heat from the stove lulled him into a daze and almost transported him back to the drawing-room in their Chicago mansion with its mahogany wood. After a time, he thought Della had fallen asleep, and he took a deep breath. Darkness had fallen over the valley. Should he light the lanterns or go to bed?

"It sounds wonderful. Like a dream."

Bastien shot a look at the still form lying in his bed.

"I just can't imagine why you ever left so much comfort and love." She spoke the last word as though such things were a myth.

He pressed his lips together. How much, or how little, love had she experienced in her lifetime? How old was she? She had mentioned her mother's death eleven years ago. Hopefully they had many years together before she died.

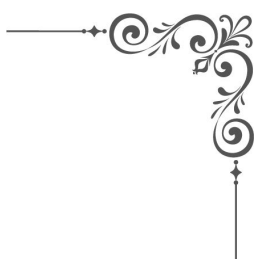
He stepped toward the bed and scratched the back of his neck. "Every man has to strike out on his own. I carry the love with me, though, in my memories. I'm thankful to you for asking."

"I loved hearing it. Much better than your books."

Bastien let out a guffaw. "You don't like my books?"

"They're fine, but nothing so real as what you just spoke of. Your voice..." Della paused as though thinking of the word.

Bastien waited for her to finish. When she didn't he rolled out his bed and arranged it the same way Della had the night before. He kept one ear cocked for her argument regarding him sleeping on the floor and was almost disappointed when it didn't come. Maybe it was the tea or the promise she'd made, but it was as if doc had removed her spunk along with her tooth. He laid down and contemplated the ceiling. Hopefully her humor would return with her health. Obedient Della was convenient, but he liked witty Della better, even if she was a bit dangerous.



Della



DELLA TIPTOED FROM the bed to the kitchen, cringing when she stepped on a squeaky board. She shot a look over her shoulder. Bastien still slept. Good. He could at least get enough sleep if he had to sleep on the floor.

She stood in front of the cupboard. Didn't it creak last time she opened it? She touched tentative fingertips to its surface and pulled ever so slowly. Squeak! She pushed the door closed and looked back at Bastien.

He lay propped up on an elbow, a smile on his lips. "Feeling better today?"

She nodded. "Oh, much."

He pressed to his knees, sat back on his heels, and let out a gaping yawn.

"Oh, please." Della walked over to him and took his elbow. He stood and let her lead him to his bed. "I feel mighty guilty about taking your bed. Lay down and wait for your breakfast. After all, this is the last day of our honeymoon. Tomorrow, you'll be laboring again." She pushed a hand into his shoulder, and he sat on the mattress.

He grinned up at her. "Who said this hasn't been labor?"

She scrunched her face like she did when arguing with her brother, Garrick. Those memories felt like they'd been lived a lifetime ago. She shook off the nostalgia and returned to the kitchen, free to cook without worrying about waking Bastien.

Bastien gave a loud yawn and Della turned to find him contemplating the bed. She placed both hands on her hips, the wooden spoon sticking out like a tail. "Do I need to pull those covers back, or will you do it yourself?"

He gave a slow shake of his head and did as she asked. Before long, he was snoring like a thundering waterfall.

The snores came and went until well past breakfast. Bastien woke with a start. "I fell asleep."

"That you did, husband. Can I get you breakfast?"

He mumbled his agreement as he climbed out of bed.

"When you're ready, could we take a walk? The snow has finally

stopped, and I'm dying for fresh air."

Bastien took a large mouthful, chewed thoughtfully, and nodded.

Della suppressed the urge to yelp with joy. Trying to keep quiet all morning in his cabin was painful. She was going to have to take up needlework, anything to keep her busy during the day.

Once he finished, he lifted his coat from the wall and offered it to her. Della came over, her heels clicking on the wooden floor, and slipped inside. He spun her to face him and pulled the opening together. "Sarah won't have yours ready until next week sometime."

His eyebrows were stark against his light skin. A smattering of freckles dusted his nose and the skin below his eyes. Too soon, he stepped away and pulled on his other coat. When they were on the porch, he again took her hand and wound it around his arm.

Once they were out from the shade of his porch, she lifted her face to the sky, letting the sun warm her cheeks. More snow had fallen in the night, and the sun's beams reflected off the white snow, drenching the cold world in sparkling sunshine.

"It's beautiful." She glanced up at him. What did he think about the sun, the snow?

An amused smile curved his lips. "I'm glad you're enjoying it. The winters here can be long." He gestured to the stables. "Would you like to ride?"

Della stared at him with what she hoped was horror. She would rather wrestle a wolf than get on one of those massive animals again. They reminded her too much of Walker and his unpredictable ways. Sometimes, she had wished Walker would just hit her and get it over with, instead of berating her with insults all evening. When Bastien had placed her on that horse, she couldn't help but wonder when it was coming, the pain. When would it buck her off or bite her foot, or step on her toes?

"No." Her voice was low.

Bastien laughed away her rejection. "I was wondering when *you* would be back."

Della knit her eyebrows.

He dipped his chin to meet her eyes as they walked past the last house in the town and into the woods. "Did you take your tea this morning?"

"Yes." As though there had been anything else for her to do.

He nodded and pulled her along. His legs were much longer than hers and the air thinner than she was used to.

She stumbled at the bruising pace.

He steadied her. "Are you hurt?"

She gasped for breath, attempting to slow her breathing so she had the air to answer him.

He shook his head and pulled her against him. "This was too much. Let's get you back."

"No," she panted, not helping her argument. "You just walk so fast."

His jaw dropped as though she'd called him a frog. Had Angelica never asked him to slow his stride? She must have legs as long as his.

Deflated at the thought of Bastien's sweetheart, Della gave him a nod. "We can start back."

They turned, and Bastien walked at a comically slow pace.

Della loosened her grip on his arm. "You're like a spring being coiled tighter and tighter. Maybe you should run back, and I'll meet you there."

Before he had a chance to reply, a small child streaked out of a cabin to their left and ran into Bastien's legs.

Bastien caught the child before he tumbled onto the snowy ground. "Well, Milo. It's good to see you."

A voice called from inside.

"Oh." Bastien's knees cracked as he crouched to Milo's level. "I think your mother is looking for you."

A young woman appeared in the doorway, a baby on her hip. "Bastien." Her face lit with a grin.

Bastien tugged Della closer and whispered, "Ready?"

Della ignored her hammering heart and smiled at the woman. Unlike Sarah, this woman didn't make eyes at Bastien. Her attention locked onto Della instead.

"Welcome to Kirwin. I'm sorry you got here right when winter started. I hope you're sure about your decision to spend it with him." She juttied a thumb towards Bastien.

"Easy," Bastien pleaded. He turned to Della. "This is Lydia. Her husband and I work together."

Lydia's eyes sparkled. "Our husbands are friends, and I hope you and I will be too."

Della felt herself drawn to this woman and her easy confidence. "Of course." Della smiled.

"Would you like to come in?" Lydia asked.

Bastien patted Milo on the head. "I was just taking my wife back. I'm afraid I've overexerted her."

Lydia turned sympathetic eyes toward Della. "Of course. We heard about your visit to doc's. You come see me tomorrow if you're feeling up to a visit."

Warmth bloomed in Della's chest at the prospect. "I would love that."

Bastien steered them towards his cabin at the other end of the main street.

Della leaned into his warmth, thinking of Milo. "That was the child who gave me up, wasn't it?"

Bastien laughed. "Yes, it surely was."

"Good to know who he favors."

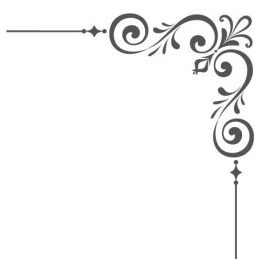
"He's a bit of a town mascot. Their new baby girl has been hard on Lydia. If she's asleep, you can bet little Milo has been banished from the cabin. He roams the street and eats his supper with anyone who will have him."

Bastien gave a quiet laugh and shook his head. "It's so different here than in Chicago. There, the children who roam the streets are dirty and neglected. Here, Milo is enjoying the best life imaginable."

"You think?" Della wasn't so sure. Her step-mother, Martha, had struggled after Della's half-brother was born. Martha needed to sleep and would push little Garrick into Della's arms, only to snatch him back and snap at her to leave them alone. Della recalled those first few months and thought food for Lydia's family might be a welcome offering. "Should we stop by the general store and pick some fruit for a pie? I can't bear the thought of biscuits again tonight."

"Really? I like your biscuits."

"Yes, well, you haven't had anything else." A wave of pride rolled through her at his compliment. She was on her way to making amends. Maybe by the time their winter was over, he would have forgiven her for trapping him.



Della

TOO SOON, THEIR HONEYMOON was over. Monday morning dawned clear and bright with no sign of snow. Della leaned against the doorframe as Bastien made his way into the mine. The sun shone on his back, lending a warmth that would dissipate once he was underground. When he was out of sight, Della surveyed the street. As the foreman, his was one of the cabins closest to the mine. Along Main Street, doors clicked closed, and men kept their heads bowed as they walked past Della to start their workday. None of them had Bastien's height. Once again, she struggled to imagine him in the small space of a mine.

With a sigh, she went back inside. On the stove lay two towels. Under one was an apple pie, and the other held a dozen biscuits.

She pulled on her shawl and walked along the gravel-strewn path to little Milo's house. Balancing the dishes in her arms, she rapped again as loud as her cold knuckles allowed. The sound of a newborn's crying came from within.

After two more knocks, Della tried the door. Opening it a crack, she stuck her nose inside. "Hello?"

Lydia pulled it open and gestured Della inside. She looked around the small cabin. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting anyone ..."

Della placed her goodies on the stove and closed the door behind her. "Oh, please don't apologize." She reached her hands towards the baby, and spoke over the squalling. "May I?"

Lydia didn't hesitate passing her child over. Della gave a nod towards the food she'd brought. "There's biscuits if you haven't had breakfast, apple pie if you have." Della tried bouncing and swaying, but the baby wasn't having any of it. She tried to imagine dealing with this on top of all the other responsibilities Lydia surely had. She glanced out the window, wishing she could take the baby outside. Fresh air might be just the change the babe needed, but Della didn't know Lydia well enough to walk away with her infant. Instead she paced the house, trying to keep her body between Lydia and her crying child as the only barrier against the noise. She saw little Milo climb down from a loft and accept a biscuit from his mother.

Eventually Lydia approached and took the baby back. She sat and when the baby began to nurse, the crying stopped as suddenly as a

switch being turned off.

Della smiled. "She was hungry."

"No." Lydia said, her voice flat. "She just wants to nurse any time she's awake."

Della sat on the chair opposite Lydia. "Bastien said she's been a hard baby. What do you call her?"

"Bridget." Lydia gave a soft snort. "I had no idea ... Milo was nothing like this."

Della didn't have words of comfort. Her half-brother was almost eleven years old. It had been an age since she cared for an infant.

Lydia's gaze lifted to Della. "This time next year, you might have one of these in your arms."

Della bit back a laugh. "Maybe ... well, I'm here to help. I brought food. Cooking is my best skill, but I can clean if you need me to." She looked around the place, which was tidier than she'd expected given Bastien's information about Milo being a rambunctious child. "It looks good in here, but surely there's some job you haven't gotten to. Cleaning out under your stove or sweeping the cobwebs."

Lydia's eyelids drooped. "No, no. You can't come here and clean my house."

"I certainly can. Bastien's house is already spotless, and not because of me. I can't figure if he's the clean one, or if someone here tends his cabin."

"I'm sure there's a lot to learn about each other." Lydia looked at her sidelong. "You two created quite a stir." She smiled. "The women up here may be married, but we all have a sister or a cousin looking for a man." Lydia cocked her head. "Maybe one day you'll tell me how you nabbed him. We all thought he had a sweetheart back home."

Milo rushed back into the room but stopped short when he saw Della standing near the biscuits instead of his mother.

"Would you like a biscuit?" Della's voice was soft. "Do you remember me? I'm Mr. Graham's wife."

The words didn't help, but as soon as she lifted the towel off the basket of biscuits, he stepped closer, keeping a wary eye on Della like a squirrel accepting food at a park.

She waited, letting him come all the way to take it directly from the basket. She wished she'd thought to bring some jam with her.

"At the table, mister." Lydia buttoned her blouse. Little Bridget curled into her lap, asleep at last.

Milo, still unsure of Della, sat in the chair next to his mother and kept his eyes on the stranger in his house as he nibbled the biscuit.

Della tapped her finger on the table, searching for something to say. "So, our husbands are friends?"

"Yes, they were friends before, and when James died, Bastien

asked Simon to be his second.”

Did Lydia have a good marriage? Did she love her husband? And how could any woman send a husband she loved into a mine every day that had killed at least one person already?

She didn’t dare ask. Lydia was already overexerted. She seemed half asleep already.

Della cleared her throat. “That’s nice they have someone down there they can both rely on.” She wanted to build a friendship with Lydia, but how could she when she was lying to the woman with every breath?

Milo finished his biscuit and bolted off again, back up to the loft.

Della laughed and turned to Lydia. “He seems easy to please. Two children. You don’t look old enough.”

“I’m not.” She jerked her head at Milo. “That one came when I was just sixteen. My pa would have shot Simon if he hadn’t married me, but he would have married me anyhow. We were just waiting until I was old enough.” Her voice carried the tone of a woman who knew she was loved. “Two on earth and one baby in heaven.”

“Oh.” Della winced. “I’m sorry.”

Lydia laid Bridget over her shoulder and patted the baby’s back. She righted her clothes and walked to the table, taking a long drink from a glass. “Time for dessert?” Lydia eyed the pie Della had brought.

“Oh, I don’t need any. I have another at Bastien’s cabin.” Della stood. “I should go. I know how precious the time is when the baby is asleep.”

“Och, don’t worry. You’ve brought my lunch, so I have some time.”

Della smiled and dished the woman a thick slice of pie. She sat down, setting the treat in front of Lydia. Della eyed Bridget asleep in her mother’s arms. “Can you eat with one hand?”

Lydia slid the plate closer to her and broke off a piece with the fork. “It’s a skill every mother has mastered.” She waved her fork at Della. “You’re going to have a hard winter out here. The first one is always the worst, and you haven’t had any time to prepare. You two will just have to keep eating at the cafe. That’s where Bastien spent most of his meals before.”

Della nodded. He’d told her as much, and his empty cupboards proved the statement.

“Have you met with the Ladies Society, yet?”

Della shook her head.

Lydia chuckled, “I bet they’re knocking on your door this minute. You must have left at the same time as Mr. Graham to have made it here first.”

Sweat formed on Della’s upper lip. Women like that would gather

within a minute that Della didn't belong to their crowd, or with Bastien. "Ladies Society? I wouldn't have thought a town this size would have upper class. How many people live here? Not more than two hundred, surely."

Lydia took another bite and moaned. "This pie is divine. Will you share your recipe?"

"For my only friend? Of course."

Lydia smiled. "The Ladies Society is not about class, dear. We're all members." She nodded to Della. "You included. Maybe they should call it 'Women's Society'. Two-hundred souls doesn't allow for upper class." She narrowed her gaze. "Though I can bet you'll have a time keeping those ladies out of your business. Be prepared to tell all when they come knocking."

Della stood. "Look at me, chatting away when I came to do some work. Now your baby is asleep, and I should let you rest." She started to go, then turned back. "You send Milo to our place any time."

Lydia smiled. "Thank you for the pie and biscuits. You're an angel."

Della gave Lydia a smile before showing herself out. Her grin carried her back to Bastien's cabin. Perhaps she'd made a new friend today.

The door to Bastien's cabin had just closed behind her when a knock sounded. Della opened it. Three women stood in a row like ducks. The youngest held baskets of goodies in her arms. The only way they could have snuck to her door without her seeing them is if they'd been waiting at the side of Bastien's cabin.

"Good morning, Mrs. Graham." The title caught Della by surprise, and she gave a nervous laugh "Hello. Come in, will you?" Thank goodness Bastien owned four chairs. She ushered each of the women into a chair and stood before them. "Can I offer you any coffee this morning?" Della stiffened as she spoke, as though she were trying to rise to their class physically, if not literally.

"Oh no, darlin'." The blond one spoke with a drawl that resembled an old neighbor who'd come from Kentucky, and set the basket on the table. "We're here to bring edibles to you and yours. We would have brought them sooner, but word was that this weekend was your honeymoon. We didn't want to disturb ya'." Her voice had a certain cheek to it that Della admired. Was she asking too much to have found yet another friend?

The oldest woman, Letty, introduced everyone and asked about Della's family. She told them about Omaha and Garrick, grazing over her father.

The third woman, Doris, spoke. She had more wrinkles than the blond one and had a big bust and hips. "I suppose your pa wasn't

there for your wedding, though if he sent you out here on mail-order he wasn't planning to be there in the first."

Heat rushed to Della's cheeks. "No. He is ill and cannot travel." The lies came forth with an ease that would make a preacher cringe.

"Well," the younger one, Margie, said, "we're a might glad you're here. The winter can get dreary, and it's nice to have a little something to spice it up."

Doris jumped in. "Speaking of, how did you catch Bastien? I wish I'd known he was looking."

Della recalled what Lydia had said about the gossip mill running wild with hers and Bastien's story. The three women's eyes shone, and they no doubt hoped to learn details which they could share with others.

"Just lucky." Della tried to smile. "Are you all married to miners?"

Doris spoke again, her face still showing the pinched look of judgement. "My husband owns the general store on the south end of town."

"Oh." Della tried to sound as impressed with her circumstances as Doris clearly was. Bastien had called that store overpriced.

Letty glanced at Margie. "Our husbands are miners. This is my third husband." She nodded at Della. "Good thing yours is a foreman." She squinted in thought. "Though it seems foremen aren't immune to the mine, either."

Margie tsked and laid a hand on Della's arm. "Don't pay her no mind. Letty's just hardened from her life."

Letty lifted an eyebrow at the blond's apology, but Della didn't mind. If she'd been in love with Bastien, that might have been a shocking comment. But as it was, Della only thought how inconvenient it would be if Bastien died. The more she thought about it, the more impossible the prospect became. Such a large man couldn't possibly be taken in his prime. An image of Walker flashed into her mind, and she inhaled.

At Della's intake of breath, Margie glared at Letty. "Enough. You'll give the poor dear nightmares."

Letty stood, unapologetic as her chair gave a hearty screech across the plank flooring. "Well, we don't want to keep you."

Della gestured to the basket. "Thank you so much."

"You're a might welcome. They aren't just from us. They are both a welcome and a wedding gift from all who were able to contribute." Margie winked. Then, as though she had just remembered, she stepped closer. Her voice took on an excited tone. "There will be an All Hallow's Eve dance next weekend. We are all sad to lose our best dancer, but one woman's loss ..."

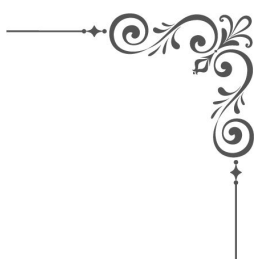
Della plastered on a smile and saw them out the door. Little did

they know, she'd never danced a step in her life.

When the door closed, she let out a sigh of relief. She hoped visits from the Society were rare. When she peeked in the basket, she bounced on her toes.

Preserves. All sorts. Peaches, pears, tomatoes, beans. Even a jar of her favorite, pickles. Della clutched them to her chest. The treats and the prospect of having just survived her first encounter with the town ladies sent her twirling around the room.

"There, now I've danced." Alone in an empty cabin though. What would it be like to dance in Bastien's arms instead? No use wondering. She'd never find out anyway.



Bastien



COMING HOME AND KNOWING someone was waiting at the cabin changed everything. Bastien had been back to work for just over a week, but that was enough time to feel the change. His step quickened after the day's work was over. Home actually felt like home when the smell of fresh biscuits and pie welcomed you through the door. And when a pretty woman, her cheek smudged with flour, greeted you with a shy smile.

True to her promise, Della had been much more agreeable than when they'd first met. She baked like some earthly angel, and though she always kept parts of her hidden, she was opening to him.

The ruse of marriage was more difficult than he thought it would be. His best friend, Simon Skinner, was full of slaps to the back and waggling eyebrows. The women in town would sometimes catch him on his way to Tewksbury's office and ask him things like what was her favorite color and did she like tea. He would come home and discuss these conversations with Della so she would remember that her favorite color was now royal blue and she didn't like tea.

"Oh, but I love tea." She'd grimaced.

"I'm sorry, I thought it safer to say no, since surely they would be expecting you to drink it if I said yes."

She had chewed her lip, leaving it glossy when she released it. "Yes, I can see how yours was the safer answer." She'd heaved a sigh. "All right. Just promise me you'll keep some in your cupboard."

That, he could do. Bastien pushed the front door open and closed it behind him, closing his eyes to let the warmth, the smell of home cooking, and soft sounds Della made as she moved about wash over him. Home. He opened his eyes to find her setting the table for dinner. Her movements were quick and purposeful.

Bastien strode across the room without greeting and gathered the silverware. He stood beside her at the table and arranged it the way she liked it. "Is your tooth pain gone?"

Her face was deadpan. "How can something pain me that isn't there?" She moved around him and opened the oven. She pulled out a pan and set it on top. The smell that had welcomed him home was even stronger now.

“Glad to hear it is better.” He clamped his lips. He probably shouldn’t have brought it up.

“Actually, thank you. I know that visit wasn’t free. If I could pay you back, I would. Maybe one day.”

He waved her away. “It was nothing. Doc owed me a favor.”

She accepted his lie and sat at the table. “I was looking through that flowers book again today. If all those blooms really are on this mountain, it must be like a fairy garden.” Her words held a note of awe as she served him a slice of a savory pie and one for herself. She stood beside her chair for a breath, a brief hesitation before she pulled the chair out and sat next to Bastien. Bastien hid a grin. Each day her hesitation at sitting at the table with him grew less and less. It was like watching an injured wild animal learn the man holding out a bit of kindness was no threat. He best not draw any attention to it.

She tucked into her slice of pie. “You probably never picked them and brought them in. I just love flowers in a cup.” Her voice was dreamlike, and her eyes turned heavenward.

“I’m afraid you won’t be filling any cups in the near future. The blooms don’t come until May. In June, we get Lupines. They paint the hills with purples and blues. There is even one spot the children call the Lupine Garden. If we’re still here, I’ll take you.”

“In June?” Her face twisted.

“Do you have somewhere to be?” He shoved a bite of pie into his mouth to hide his smile.

“No, I just ...” Her gaze dropped to the table, and as soon as they weren’t on him, he missed their warmth. “I thought as soon as you could, you’d take me out of here.”

“I’m sorry, wife, but you’re stuck with me until this job is through. Although ...”

She met his gaze again.

“You haven’t met Tewksbury’s wife because she stays in town. If you wanted, I could find a place and keep you in town.”

“No!” Della exploded, then with a breath she composed herself. “That doesn’t seem very wife-like.”

Bastien laughed. “No, but some women would say it wasn’t husband-like to force a woman to stay on this isolated mountain.”

Della cocked an eyebrow. “You’d have your bed back.”

“I’d have my bed.” He nodded with a smile.

“But it would cost you, and I wouldn’t be earning my keep.”

He knitted his eyebrows together. “Your keep?”

“You know. Cooking and cleaning in exchange for a place to live.”

Realization stretched across Bastien’s mind. “Is that what you think marriage is?”

“Is it not? The man works to provide food. The woman tends to his

needs. One can't live without the other."

"I lived." He sat back, interested to learn her perspective.

"Yes, but that was only temporary. A man doesn't stay single his whole life." She cocked her head at him, and her gaze dared him to deny it.

Bastien crossed his arms. "I think, if a man makes enough money, he can live without a woman forever. He can hire out his laundry, take his meals at the cafe, even get a dog if he needs a companion."

"A dog? For companionship?" She blushed. "What about companionship of another sort? I suppose the brothels will do for that, though."

"I don't do brothels, I told you."

"Well, then, there's another way to companionship, but I'm not allowed to speak of it. Her."

Bastien kept his eyes trained on Della. "All right. You may speak of her." He gave her the smallest nod.

"You were loved by another. The life you live here on this mountain is only temporary. You wouldn't have been able to do it forever, not that the women in this town would have left you single for long."

Bastien thought of Angelica and if her love was something he'd ever given a second thought. Della's mention of the town women claimed his focus and he turned to her. "What do you mean they wouldn't leave me single for long?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Apparently, there were women who would like to have seen you married to someone else."

"Who?" This was the first he'd heard of this.

"The only reason they held back was because of dear Angelica."

He regretted discussing Angelica, and he doubted Della's claims. It wasn't too far-fetched for some ladies to meddle and arrange romances for single men. Even Lydia had mentioned a sister at one point, though never in regards to him.

"Surely none of them were mean to you?" He remembered his younger sister, who told him of her schoolmates' ruthless ways, their ability to scar one another without leaving a mark.

She easily followed his train of thought. "Not at all. It isn't me they *don't* like. It's you they *do* like." With a calculating eye, she watched him as though she were considering her words. It left Bastien feeling like he would never know all of her, not even if they spent three winters in the same house.

"I need you to see yourself as an outsider would. You are the *foreman*. The only man higher than you has the biggest house in town and—"

"Only recently. Before that, I was a miner like the rest of them."

She held up her hand in a gesture of silence.

"You were never like the rest of them, miner or not. Even then, you showed promise. How else did you get promoted? You are from a good family." She narrowed her eyes. "I haven't quite learned how well yet, and you are tall and healthy. Handsome." She gave that last detail with a blink as though it pained her. "The women in this town would have seen you married long ago if it weren't for your beloved."

Bastien laughed. "Well, it was lucky for you that I wasn't."

Her eyebrows knit together. "Was it?" Her face smoothed, and she rushed to explain. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful. I just ... it would have been better to find a man who didn't have a girl at home and who *needed* a wife. But you are right. I'm lucky to have found someone so accommodating." She eyed the area on the floor where he slept.

Della's words left his head spinning. Had the idea of Angelica really sustained him? His thoughts regarding his childhood sweetheart leaned more towards the far future rather than bringing him comfort during the present. He'd chosen Kirwin because it was the opposite of Chicago. Kirwin had no brothels, only upstanding families. His Graham name meant nothing. Almost three years later though, he had begun to love the wilderness. The longer he stayed, the more he longed for his own home in a valley such as this. Angelica might no longer wish to marry him if he decided to set up his household outside of Chicago.

He changed the subject from husbands and Angelica. "Did you hear there will be a dance next weekend? The winter is usually full of them. The families are all stir-crazy from the snow, and there isn't much else to do."

"I did. I can already see how welcome they must be. The days can get long waiting for you men to come home."

Home. That was the closest she'd come to verbal ownership of where they lived. She lived in it more than he did, yet she was mindful always to call everything his.

Bastien rolled his eyes and made a face. "Do you wait for some other man I don't know about or are you actually anxious to see me at day's end?"

She gave him a childish glare and stood, taking his plate and scraping it into the trash before dunking it into the dry-sink. "The society ladies mentioned the dance when they came by on Monday morning. Will we go?"

"I assumed we would, but if you don't want to ..." He waited, hoping she would clue him in to her desires. From what she'd told him of her home life and her deference to his wants, he figured she hadn't much experience making decisions for herself. "It sounds like it would

be fun.”

She scrubbed the dishes from dinner. “I think I’d like to go.”

A smile spread across his face at the unexpected reward for his patience. He would have to be mindful to wait more and allow her to decide instead of plowing ahead in his own way. Bastien stood, gathering the remaining items from the table. “Then we shall.”

When she smiled into the dishes, he had an unexpected urge to put his arm around her. He shook his head. One week in, and she already stirred feelings in him that ought not to be acknowledged.

In an effort to dampen his thoughts, he recalled memories from his childhood in Chicago. He sorted through the family ones and picked out the times that included Angelica. Their families were close. For years, possibly since her birth, their families had planned on their wedding. Ivete was ecstatic, as Angelica and she had grown through childhood as close as sisters.

He’d been out of Chicago over two years now, and some days he could hardly conjure Angelica’s image. His old feelings for her were faded. They were compatible. He knew that much. He just needed to return so they could spend some time together. Those youthful desires would return, of that he was sure. Soon he could provide for her properly. Though their families were friends, her father would reject a proposal before he had the means to give her the life to which she was accustomed.

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting the streets in darkness. Bastien looked from the window to his empty plate. Dinner was finished, and Bastien faced another night with no way to entertain Della. “I’m going to step out for a bit. Will you be okay here?”

Della wasn’t yet finished with supper dishes. She gave him a wide-eyed stare. “Sure.”

Bastien wasted no time stepping to the porch and shutting the door on her and his growing feelings. He leaned against the wood, taking a steadying breath. He’d have to meditate on Angelica for every waking hour just to chase Della from his thoughts. Too bad Angelica was too proper to play chase.

Bastien hoisted himself from the front of his porch and strolled toward the general store. Once there, Sarah greeted him. The store was bright in a way that most Kirwin residents couldn’t afford. But for the trees, this store could act as a lighthouse for travelers. More than once, Bastien was drawn to the building and the warmth it promised.

“I’m looking for a book for Della. She’s not interested in the five on my shelf.”

Sarah gave her shoulders an excited shake. “I’m so glad to see you. I finished your wife’s coat, but I thought it too late to deliver tonight. I’ll go get it from the back.”

As he waited, Bastien had a sinking feeling. Maybe he should have let Della decide on the cut. He made a pragmatic choice, thinking he knew what she needed. It was foolish to let her choose when she had no idea what she would need in this cold country, yet now that it was ready, he second-guessed himself.

Sarah returned, the coat draped over her forearms. The jacket was animal hide, like his warmest one. Leather cut the wind, which was necessary for life in Wyoming. The inside was lined with wool, while the collar boasted a fox pelt. He'd chosen the fur because he knew it would complement her copper eyes. The cuffs were large and also lined with fur. They could be unfolded to protect her hands. Against Sarah's recommendation, it would hit Della at the tops of her thighs. He'd asked for it to be longer, but Sarah was adamant that it was as long as any lady would possibly wear.

"It's perfect." Bastien's eyes drank in the item.

"I'll wrap it. You can't give your beloved an unwrapped gift." Sarah whisked it away before Bastien could tell her not to bother.

He was buying it for her, so technically, it was a gift.

Sarah returned and handed the parcel to him, complete with a fabric bow.

He made to head back, but Sarah called out, "I don't have any novels, but I do have sewing patterns she may be interested in. I'll ask around for a book."

"Wonderful." He tipped his hat and walked back to the cabin.

When he entered, he found Della had scooted his armchair closer to the stove, the feather cushions curving around her body. Her cheeks were pink from the warmth, a color many women in Chicago had to manufacture. When her eyes met his, the color deepened.

She stood, stepping to the side as though making room for him. "You weren't gone long."

"Please, don't get up." He should get another armchair. He held the parcel behind his back. The wrapping lent this gift a momentous air.

She obeyed, though she eyed him with suspicion. She perched on the edge of the chair, not relaxing into it as she had been when he arrived.

He pulled the box from behind his back and placed it on her knees. Pulling a chair over, he nodded for her to open it.

She stared at the ribbon with stars in her eyes. "Lovely! I can use it to brighten up the cabin." She turned those star eyes to him.

He couldn't look away, though his stomach flipped and his palms grew sweaty under her admiration. "That's not even the gift. Open it." His nervousness rose with each passing second. Any gift he'd ever given to Angelica, had been picked out by Ivete. Never had Bastien

experienced the anxiety of whether the receiver would appreciate what he'd chosen. No matter how much he tried to remind himself that this woman would be out of his life soon, he still couldn't shake the hope that she would like what she found.

When Della lifted the lid off the box, she drew a sharp breath. She ran her fingers along the fur, hardly touching them as they passed over the fibers. Della lifted the shoulder of the garment, sliding the leather between her fingers before removing her hand as though she had been burned. She gripped the box and handed it to Bastien. "Gracious, I can't accept this. I would never be able to pay you back, not with a thousand biscuits."

"A thousand? This jacket doesn't cost that much. No, I'm thinking a single plateful's a good trade." He kept his hands in his lap. The contrast between Della and Angelica was almost comical.

When Della's eyes began to shine, he feared she might cry.

He knelt in front of her and pulled it from the box. "Will you at least try it on?"

She shook her head.

"You don't like it?" Maybe he could appeal to her good manners. It worked.

"I love it." A single tear fell from her lashes as she glanced between him and the garment.

Bastien stood and held out his hand. When she didn't take it, he said, "Should I remind you that you promised to be more agreeable?"

Della's mouth fell open. "I'm trying to be agreeable by not allowing you to waste your wages. I don't need this. It's far too much for someone like me."

She'd used that term before—*someone like me*. He longed to understand the way she saw herself. He shifted his eyes from hers to his outstretched hand and back. She dropped her hand into his with a huff. Drawing her to her feet, he leaned over her and pulled the coat around her back. With her assistance, he slid her arms into the sleeves and pulled either side of the collar together in the front.

"Fits well. Go to the looking glass." She gave him a long stare as though she were trying to hold something back before turning and moving to the dresser where he kept his shave kit and looking glass.

He followed, standing to the side so he could appreciate her reaction. When she lifted the oval mirror and inspected herself, her face lit like a wick being turned up on the lantern. She could likely only see a few inches at a time, but it was enough. The colors complemented her complexion in a sort of dance. Some parts were blending, while others were contrasting.

"Now. It's a gift, and I don't want to hear any more about how I spend my money."

She swallowed, unable to speak for a moment. When she finally did, she said, "You're being too kind. I've taken advantage of you." Della's tears fell in earnest now.

Bastien's knees wobbled and he almost hit the floor. He stepped away, shocked by his intense reaction.

"I didn't know you were so kind when I climbed into that wagon. I really didn't think at all. Only that I knew I should be in this town." She slid the coat off and held it out to him. "It's beautiful, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It should be for someone you"—she swallowed and looked longingly at the coat—"for anyone else."

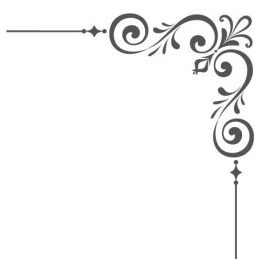
Bastien plucked the coat from her outstretched hand and dropped it in the box. Apparently no woman could accept a gift with pure gratitude. He stomped out of the house. Not a minute had passed before he gathered his thoughts and stalked back inside. "If you won't wear it for yourself, wear it for me. Sarah knows we have it. She'll be expecting you to wear it, and I can't have my wife walking around town in that flimsy shawl of yours or my best coat. I need my best coat. The mine isn't exactly the warmest place of business."

Della bit her lip, her face screwed up as though her mind was whirling with reasons why she shouldn't take it. "Okay."

Bastien opened his mouth to argue when her compliance hit him. He narrowed his eyes.

She gave a shaky laugh, her cheeks still wet from her tears. "You're right. I have to wear it now. Only I wish you hadn't spent so much." She walked to the table and lifted the garment to admire the fox pelt. "You have fine taste, Mr. Graham."

Did he have fine taste? When Angelica had been on his arm, many had said those exact words. What would they say now that Angelica only came to his mind if he intentionally put her there. Instead he longed for a mysterious beauty, a no one from Omaha who had no family to speak of.



Della



DELLA WALKED TO THE barn first thing after Bastien left for work. The ladies were all meeting to decorate for the dance that evening. The amount of fabric and garland they hung had Della wide-eyed, taking in the space with admiration. The place looked like a fairy realm. She wanted to escape into its magic. The mine must be doing well to afford such luxuries. There was a small stage set centered against a wall. Keeping everything focused around it, tables lined the outer edges. Della could almost picture them filled with food.

“That’s a lovely coat.” Margie fingered the supple leather.

Della half-smiled as a self-conscious twinge pricked her neck. “Thank you. Bastien had it made.”

“The fox pelt is lovely.” Margie twisted her mouth. “It’s too bad he didn’t go with a darker leather. It would have really made the fur stand out.” She removed her hand. “A sweet thought, though. Let’s have you put some garland over by the entry. I want this place to pop when someone walks in.”

Margie left to order someone else around and maybe give them a backhanded compliment.

Della rolled her eyes before grabbing a few strands of garland and starting for the entrance.

Lydia approached with a smile. “Want some help?” She lifted one end of the strand as Della struggled to tie some twine around a section of the greenery.

“Thank you,” Della said, unable to keep from noticing the difference she felt in Lydia’s presence versus Margie’s.

Lydia nudged Della with an elbow and grin. “That coat is gorgeous. Is it the one Bastien got?”

“Yes.” Della pursed her lips, trying not to be ungrateful. “How did you know?”

“Men talk as much as women do.” Lydia nodded. “He’s been hankering for someone to spoil. He loves to buy sweets for Milo. I swear that kid waits outside the store just to see if Bastien will be in.”

Della laughed at the image. She wished he’d only spoiled her with candy and not obscenely expensive items. Every time she thought of the garment, she had to remind herself of its outrageous cost. If she

didn't keep herself in check, she might begin to hope, and hoping for a life like the one she was living with Bastien was as dangerous as strong drink. If she partook, she could lose sight of all reality.

A commotion drew Della's eyes to the barn's entrance. A heavily bearded man stood with a pack over his shoulder.

"It'll be a trapper," Lydia said. "They're the only ones in and out of here over the winter. He'll bring news from town if he's on his way out, instead of heading back into town."

The two ladies drew nearer to listen to his words.

"Martin Greiner is scouring the territory. Has a handful of wanted papers. I wonder if his might be an easier profession than mine." The man ran a hand down his long beard, likely kept to warm his face in these frigid hills.

A woman spoke. "When we lived in Meeteetse, we saw plenty of bounty hunters on their way through. That Martin though, he always gets his man."

The trapper cut in, "And woman. I hear he's got an ad for a woman this time. Crazy Daisy."

Della felt the heat drain from her face as the air rushed from her breast. Her knees buckled and Lydia caught her elbow, holding her aright.

"Della, are you unwell?" Lydia's eyes raked Della's face with worry. Or was it suspicion?

Della pulled away. She'd forgotten how she couldn't trust anyone. "I just rolled my ankle is all."

Lydia surveyed her for a moment longer before leading her to a seat along the wall. The conversation with the trapper moved from news to prices for the few pelts that hung from his pack.

Lydia broke the heavy silence. "Can you imagine hunting down a woman? The west is truly becoming lawless. Folk will hardly travel by train with all the robberies. One would think there were worse men to hunt and ladies might be left alone."

Della nodded. Not trusting herself to speak. If only ladies were immune to bounty hunters. She let out a huff. Ladies likely were. Husband killers were not. Her head swam and though she kept moving, hanging garlands and straightening decorations, she barely knew what she was doing. Would anyone suspect her? Had they reason to? What would Lydia say if she knew? The thought of losing her only friend so soon after gaining her felt like a knife in the gut. Worse, though, was thinking of Bastien. The knife twisted then. He'd never want to see her again if he knew she was the one on the wanted poster, if he knew Della his pretend bride was Crazy Daisy.

The Hallow's Eve dance was a festival that held merriment like Della had never experienced. She'd never attended parties or any

wedding besides her own, which had been a bleak affair. Della had been thrilled at the prospect of leaving her father's home and creating one of her own, but both her father and Walker had been grim, as though each were getting the worse end of the deal. If Della had known she were the one getting the rotten apple she might have tempered her excitement.

This event was so lavish she thought it might be what Bastien could expect for his wedding to Angelica. The tables were filled with all sorts of foods, at least one from every household. Three of the plates were from Bastien's household, prepared by her own hands. A husband and wife sat on stage, their fiddle and banjo harmonizing better than any duo she'd ever heard. Skirts swished as their owners twirled. Along the back wall stood a line of single miners of all ages, come for the food if not the dancing.

"You may not be married to me." Bastien's breathy voice startled her as it tickled her ear. "But you can't marry any of them."

Della stepped away from Bastien, and immediately missed his warmth. Playing the part of the doting wife, Della pulled him in by the lapels of his jacket and gazed into his eyes. "I was only wondering why you were the one to replace James when there are so many other single men in these parts? If I were lucky, his replacement would have been looking for a *real* wife."

"Pray, tell me how you think this fantasy would have worked out?" Bastien's eyes darkened. He removed her hands from his coat and took a step back.

Della pursed her lips. She thought back to the day she'd met Bastien. There was no preacher in town, so either way, she would have been taken back into Meeteetse. Would she have been able to convince a man in that short a time? Possibly. But what kind of man would he be?

She shook her head. It didn't matter. Any man had to be better than Walker. If she could survive him, she could survive anybody.

Bastien's laugh was low and sardonic. "James left you in a pickle, and where you are right now is about the best scenario."

She straightened her back. "You could show a bit more manners."

"Well, my darling." He lowered his voice, mocking her with the pet name. "I'll show you how good they can be."

He scooped her onto the dance floor and spun her, so she clung to him. With a laugh, he slowed and adjusted her hands. One on his shoulder, her elbow resting atop his, and the other hand pressed against his palm. His arms were firm, and she clung to their strength as he twirled her.

Despite her fumbling feet as she searched for the floor, Bastien's arms held her aloft. Like a lifeline in a winter's storm, he brought her

to safety amidst her struggles on the dance floor. Her long skirts may have covered her stumbles, but it was easy to see she was out of her depth.

When the song ended, Della was breathless in a way she hadn't been since running through the streets with her brother as a child.

She beamed at Bastien. "That was fun."

"Yes, well, you're not an easy partner." He rolled his shoulder as though dancing had caused him pain. "Have you never danced before?"

"Nope." Della was unashamed.

Bastien laughed and gave a soft shake of his head. "I'll get us drinks."

Her gaze lingered on his long body as he weaved through the crowd. A warmth sat in her belly, like a tiny coal burning bright orange. Once he disappeared from sight, she sighed, taking in the swaying skirts and click of heels, unable to contain the smile that pressed up from her heart. She should be scared, hiding, running even, with that bounty hunter on her tail. But she couldn't summon the energy. Dancing with Bastien, smiling with him, talking to him, being touched by him. All of it made her worries melt away. What harm could come her way while she was in his strong arms?

Mr. Schnitzel sidled close to Della, his cheeks rosy from the warm room. "How are you liking our little town?" He beamed and puffed up his chest.

"Oh, it's been wonderful so far. Thank you." She searched for Bastien.

Mr. Schnitzel touched her elbow. "Would you like to dance?"

"Oh." She fumbled for words, unsure of how to turn down the man who paid Bastien's wages. "I'm not ... I can't."

When Bastien arrived, Della reached for the lapel of his suit jacket, her eyes pleading.

Bastien nodded. "Mr. Schnitzel."

"I guess your wife will be staying in town for the winter."

Bastien snaked his hand around Della's waist and pulled her tight with a raised brow. "She sure is. Can't do without her. You're a champ for hosting these dances. I'm sure you miss having a partner."

"I do." Mr. Schnitzel glanced to the dance floor. "I was just asking your lovely wife to partner me."

Della's heart quickened. Instead of helping her, he was going to feed her to the wolf.

"My own Della is just learning to dance." Bastien briefly gazed into her eyes before addressing him again. "Perhaps after a few of these dances, she'll feel brave enough for a new partner, and you might take her for a turn."

Della resisted the urge to stamp on Bastien's foot but stayed calm. *A turn*, as though she were a toy to be shared amongst the boys. As her cheeks burned, she tried to smother the sensation with a sip of her drink.

Bastien pressed his fingers into her side, his mouth close to her ear. "My dear, you are flushed."

Della narrowed her eyes, then wiped the resentment from her face before Mr. Schnitzel cut his eyes in her direction.

"Why don't we step outside?" Bastien removed his arm from her waist and pulled her hand. "Excuse us, sir?"

Della gave Mr. Schnitzel a wave and a smile before rushing out the door where an arctic blast greeted them. Della crossed her arms and gripped her elbows. "Take a turn?" She raised her eyebrows before tucking her chin.

He winked. "You'll be better after a little practice."

Della gave a hard laugh. "I was as floppy as a shirt in the breeze. I'll never be ready for another partner."

Bastien's eyes flashed to something behind her. He stepped closer and dipped his head. "Please lower your voice."

Della tossed her head in annoyance. "Sorry," she spat.

When he didn't speak, she continued. "You said so yourself. I'm awful."

"I never said that." His voice was indignant.

"Well, if it wasn't what you said, it was what you meant." Her voice crept higher in volume.

"You're getting heated again."

Della pulled a lungful of air through her nose, then released it.

"Will you dance with me again?" His eyes were soft and held no trace of mockery.

Della resisted the urge to roll her eyes and tried to subdue whatever emotion had her speaking so harshly to him. She nodded.

They returned to the warmth of the barn and sipped their drinks in silence. The moment she finished her cider, he set the glass on a nearby barrel that doubled as a tabletop. He stretched out a hand to her. "Wife?"

She accepted it, and he led her to the floor.

He brushed his thumb across her knuckles. "You're not as bad as you think. Just do what you did before but follow my lead. This one is slower."

He was right. This dance was much easier to manage, though her carefree feeling didn't return. The warmth in her belly grew, and she decided, clumsy or not, she enjoyed dancing very much. She closed her eyes, trying to soak in every bit of the graceful movements.

Bastien's grip tightened and shook her from her reverie. "You're

not there yet. Keep your eyes open.”

Della set him in her sights. “You can’t even let me have a moment.”

“You can, just have it with your eyes open.”

They bid farewell to the other guests and made their way along the boards that served as a walk, their feet crunching on the fresh fallen snow. Since the walkway was narrow, Bastien kept his arm around her as they walked. A passerby might even think they were truly in love. She glanced at him. He was committed to this ruse, even keeping the pretense when nobody was in sight. It was an admirable act. One she might try harder to mirror. She’d hollered at him earlier.

She pressed his arm. “Sorry I raised my voice.”

“Thank you.” A puff of hot air escaped his lips as he spoke.

“I’ll do better when others can see us.”

“That’s generous of you.” His voice sounded flat, and he sniffed before releasing her and stepping onto the porch. He tapped the toes of his boots on the doorframe, knocking off any snow before entering his cabin.

Della followed suit and closed the door behind them.

“It’s freezing.” Her teeth chattered as she clutched her coat, unwilling to remove it.

“You’re going to have to be tougher. This isn’t cold.” His stern voice lowered as he reached for the shelf to gather his bedroll. He quite clearly avoided her gaze.

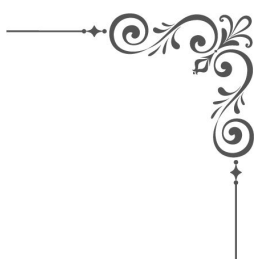
“Are you angry?”

He kept his eyes on the task. “What could I be mad about?”

“I don’t know,” Della whispered. “I said I was sorry for raising my voice.”

Della stepped closer and noticed her shoes were dripping. She moved back and bent to take them off. Once she set them by the door, she walked over and helped him straighten the blankets.

“I’m not as mindful as you. You keep the facade even when nobody is watching. Only in here do you let it go. I’ll do better.” She waited, yet Bastien said nothing as he laid down and rolled over. She spoke true. She’d have to do better. This mountainside may not be as safe as she’d once thought.



Bastien



THE WEEKS PASSED QUICKER with Della in his cabin. One evening, as she cleaned the dinner dishes Bastien shook the hair off his forehead.

“Your hair is in dire need of a cut. Would you allow me to do it?” Della asked with a smile.

“*Allow?* I’d be quite grateful.” He winced, regretting the too-quick response. “Do you know how?”

“I’m a fair hand. Who cut it before?”

“Oh, I usually went to Meeteetse and then just let it grow during the winter.”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “You must have looked quite ragged come spring.”

Bastien laughed. “Probably. The length might have helped keep my head warm, though. You might imagine how cold it is in that mine.”

“I can.” His wool cap was shrinking from sweat, and he would need a new one soon.

He opened a book but kept his gaze on Della as he pretended to read. He exhaled, enjoying the comfort her after dinner cleaning routine brought.

He tried and failed to imagine Angelica in this role. They both lived with servants, and doing for oneself was uncommon. No, Angelica was not suited for this remote lifestyle. When he thought of Angelica, his mind wandered to his mother. Bastien flattened his lips, knowing what *she’d* say about Della.

Instead of picturing Angelica here, he tried to conjure the image of Della at dinner with his family in their Chicago mansion. Della was pretty enough to be at their table, but he doubted she could rein in her sharp tongue. Both his parents had been wealthy all their lives. His mother determined to uphold European class standards. It wouldn’t be a complete shock if she sent Ivete to London to find a husband rather than the nouveau riche that were cropping up all over Chicago as a result of industry. Della couldn’t even fit in with those types.

He watched Della push a lock of hair from her face, water running off her fingertips. If Della thought the women in Kirwin were

resentful, she would never be able to stand the scrutiny of Chicago society. Even Ivete was beginning to show signs of rebelling against the expectation of their parents. Maybe he wouldn't be the only child to reject their carefully-made plans.

He sighed and tried to read his novel. Such thoughts were merely entertaining. Growing closer to Della only served to teach him how perfectly matched he and Angelica were. Nobody would resent *their* marriage. Far from it, the union would be welcomed and feted beyond even their wedding feast.

Della wiped her hands on a towel. "Shall I cut it tonight? Or are you tired?"

Bastien glanced at her as though his mind had ever been on the book. "Now is good."

Della gave a curt nod and pulled a dining chair to the center of the room. She walked to the silverware drawer and retrieved his scissors. She made a face. "They could be sharper." She lifted her eyes to him. "Do you have a file?"

Bastien shook his head, and Della shrugged. "These will have to do. Sit." She pointed the scissors at the chair.

As he sat, she lay the towel across his shoulders. She stepped back and chewed her lip, surveying him. "No good. You'll have to remove your shirt. Even washing doesn't take out all the little hairs. If you don't, you'll be itching for a week." She removed the towel and faced in the opposite direction.

He stared at her back as he undid the buttons and removed his shirt. "Okay." His voice sounded gravelly and unfamiliar. He glanced at his torso, curious what she would think when she spun around.

When Della faced him again, she sucked in a breath. His lips curled up in a satisfied grin.

"Um, here." She fumbled for her words and gave an audible gulp as she draped the towel over him once again.

"So, what do you think?" He glanced over his shoulder.

She stood behind him and tugged on the ends of his hair.

"Do you want me to keep it like it is, only shorter?"

"Yes. Much shorter, please."

As Della ran her fingers along his scalp, Bastien closed his eyes. If their circumstances were different he might allow himself to savor her hands in his hair.

She lifted and snipped bits and pieces, letting them drift to the floor. "You've got some curl on these long pieces. Many girls would die for hair like yours." Della rounded the chair to stand in front of him.

He trailed her with his eyes until she stopped, his gaze level with her chest. Bastien inhaled and dropped his eyes to her waist, chanting

Angelica's name in his head. As more of his dark hair fell, he tried looking at the ground.

"I need your head up if you want this even." She placed a hand on either side of his face and adjusted it. He closed his eyes, reeling from the sensation of her proximity and her hands on him.

"Almost done?" He clenched his teeth.

"Almost." Her voice was light, with none of the frustration coursing through him.

After an eternity of suppressed tension, she handed him the looking glass. It was a fine cut. Any Chicago barber would be jealous of her skill.

She swept the hair off the toes of his boots and then from the floor.

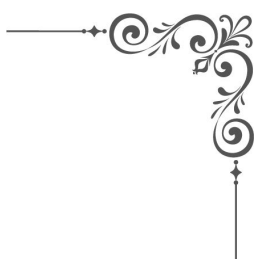
"You did a fine job," he said. The second he stood, the towel slipped from his shoulders. When he bent to retrieve it, Della sucked in a loud breath and averted her eyes.

Bastien stood a bit taller, a smile playing on his lips at her discomfort. He'd suffered at her hand while in that chair, fighting the urge to bring her close. Now it was her turn. Instead of donning his shirt, he gathered the blankets for his bed, all the while watching her from the corner of his eye. She seemed to be occupying herself in the kitchen end of the cabin.

Bastien knew he was playing with fire, but it was as if she had cast a spell on him. He closed the gap between them and lowered his voice. "Can you see if I have any hair that needs to be brushed off before I replace my shirt?"

She gave a huff and raked her gaze over him. He doubted she'd paused long enough to actually see if any hairs remained, but she nodded as if she had. "You're good." Then she busied herself in the kitchen once more.

He slipped his shirt on with a chuckle and found his way to his bedroll, never more thankful for a firm floor. Hopefully, his aches and pains would be enough to take his mind off of one Ms. Della Hampton.



14

Della



TWO DAYS AFTER BASTIEN had gone for the Thanksgiving hunt, Della and Lydia were cleaning up dinner while Simon played on the floor with Milo, little Bridget asleep on the bed.

Lydia passed a wet dish to Della. "I hope the hunters come back with a good haul. Last year Simon got an elk and brought home the best cuts. I'll be happy for anything Karsten hasn't salted beyond recognition."

Della laughed. There was one meat locker and the owner, Karsten, made sure it was far from rotten and might last another year if the town weren't desperate enough to use it through winter. Once the dishes were dried and placed on the shelf, both women sat at the table.

Della thought of Bastien out there, possibly hunting down an elk of his own. "I hope he's warm enough. His socks have all gotten rather thin."

"I'm sure he's fine. Men who work mines aren't faint of heart. I'll help you make him a few new pairs though. You could give them to him for Christmas." Lydia nodded at Della's feet. "Your ankle seems to have no lasting pain from setting up the dance."

Della glanced at Lydia, confused.

"You rolled it when that trapper was speaking to us ..."

"Oh, yes. They're ... weak." Della gulped, her excuse was pitiful and Lydia too sharp for Della's lies.

"What would you have done if Bastien hadn't been the man to receive you? I can't imagine there were many options after traveling all this way."

"No. James O'Leary left me in a bit of a mess."

Lydia huffed. "He wasn't exactly an angel. Simon says he was stirring up the men with talk of joining the Wobblies. Out here, any union would be quashed in an instant and the men involved sent away. He's lucky it didn't find any traction."

Bastien had mentioned these Wobblies and the need to protect the men by using iron supports instead of wood. Apparently, James wasn't the only foreman to agree with Wobbly ideals.

Once the children were in bed Della took her leave, allowing

Simon and Lydia to have some alone time. As she walked home, she chuckled to herself. A few children might be just the buffer she and Bastien could benefit from. An image of him shirtless with freshly cut hair flashed into her mind. She quashed it with the fact that he wasn't hers to admire. And if Lydia pressed much harder, Della might be found out before the winter was over.

She shut and latched the door to Bastien's cabin. The empty space was cold and large without Bastien's tall frame to fill it. She lit the lantern and settled into the bed with the wildflower book. She opened to her favorite page, the purple Asters. she remembered how she'd felt when Bastien spoke of how their seeds spread when trodden. How she'd felt when he'd spoken her real name. Daisy. When her eyes grew heavy, she turned down the light and nestled deeper into the covers. No matter that he hadn't slept in it since her arrival, the blankets held his scent and comforted her as she fell asleep.

A pounding sounded on the door and Della sat up, her hands groping the empty space as her mind tried to make sense of what was happening. The sounds came again. Was it the bounty hunter? Had he come for her while Bastien was away?

"Della?" came a female voice from the other side.

Della flung back the blankets and stepped on the ice-cold plank floor, shivering.

When she opened the door and saw the concerned look on the doc's wife's face, Della's heart rate spiked.

"It's Bastien. He's hurt," Maribel said.

Della stepped into her boots, cursing the way they folded under her heels before she bent to right them. She grabbed her jacket and pulled it on as she rushed down the street. The cold air shocked her lungs, and she sucked a shuddering breath, praying all the way to Doc's house.

When Della entered, the first thing she saw was Bastien's body laid out on Doc's dining table, his shirt stained red. Della's mouth went dry, and she fell to her knees. She closed her eyes as her vision swam. She had worried so much about him being warm enough out there. Him getting hurt hadn't even crossed her mind.

"He had a tussle with a bear," Doc said, his back to Della as she approached the table. Doc tore Bastien's shirt so he could remove it from his body, and the loud rip made Della start. Regaining her composure, she climbed up from her knees and approached him, cupping his pale face between her shaking hands.

"Talk to him. He'll like to hear your voice."

Bastien's face was serene. An impossible counter to the gruesome laceration that lay beneath his neck. Angry stripes coursed the length of his upper arm and shoulder then across his chest. Only one bled

freely.

She reached out, aching to comfort him. She knew it might be unwelcome. Angelica would be the woman he wished to hold him, not the stranger who had conned her way under his hospitable wing. But he wasn't the only one who needed the comfort of a touch. She needed it too. Ignoring her insecurities, Della brushed a lock of hair from his forehead and caressed his face. The thought of his generosity filled her chest.

"Speak to him." The doc's face hovered inches from Bastien's chest as he sewed the gash closed.

The coppery scent of blood assailed her nose. Della squeezed her eyes tight and drew a steady breath, opening them to focus on Bastien. "I'm sorry." The words tumbled from Della's lips. "Please wake up so I can tell you how sorry I am."

Bastien's eyebrows twitched.

Della gasped. "He moved." She glanced at the doc, then at Maribel. "Did you see that?"

Doc gave her a withering glance. "He's not dead. Moving isn't what I want. I want him conscious. He lost a lot of blood on that hill."

Della returned to the task, ready to work harder this time.

"Bastien, you can't sleep now. Can you wake up?" She gave his cheek a few taps. His eyes rolled beneath his eyelids.

"This is just like you, to hear me but not look at me." Della tried to tease, but her voice quivered. The real danger of losing this man who was not her family, yet showed more kindness than any male she knew, settled in her chest. She surveyed his face for any sign of waking. Still nothing. She ran her fingers through his hair and along his scalp and inhaled his familiar scent of smoke and apples. His scruff was longer than she'd ever seen it, and she traced his jaw with featherlight touches. He made a sound in the back of his throat.

"Oh, did you like that?" Della teased, brushing his jaw again. Nothing. "No?" She pressed her fingers through his hair again, applying more pressure this time.

He made the noise again.

She rubbed his head in earnest.

A smile lifted his mouth.

"Darling," Maribel whispered to her husband. "I think he's awake."

Bastien's eyes opened, and he surveyed the room and Della standing over him.

"Did I get the bear?" his rough voice rumbled.

Della scoffed and resisted smacking him on the top of his head. Relief poured out of her and she longed to hold him.

Doc chuckled. "You got him. Karsten is fixing that pelt for you as we speak."

Were the two men out of their minds? Bastien could be dead, and they were discussing a trophy.

Once Doc finished, a few men helped move Bastien to their cabin. Doc followed and gave Della strict instructions on his care. She was to keep him awake for another hour, then check his temperature every hour.

Doc lifted an eyebrow. "Call me if he gets even the slightest fever."

"But I'm not a doctor. I can't tell his temperature." Della gulped.

"You know it better than you think," Maribel said. "Don't use your hand, they can be cold on their own, and it's hard to tell. Just press your cheek to his forehead. You'll know if he's warm."

Once everyone left, Bastien frowned. "Why is it so cold in here?"

"Your stove doesn't like me. It won't stay lit for more than half an hour."

"You need to adjust the damper," he croaked.

"I haven't changed anything since you left."

He gave a weak laugh that almost folded Della's heart in half.

"That's the issue. If it's up, you'll have to feed the fire all night. Down and it will burn slower."

"Well, this bit of information might have helped two days ago."

He laughed, then groaned. "Don't be funny."

"I'm trying to be mean." She threw her hands in the air.

He laughed again.

Della fiddled with the fire and asked him questions along the way. The lesson served to teach her how to work his stove *and* to keep him awake. Once an hour had passed, she stood near his head.

"I have to check your temperature." She placed a cold hand to his forehead.

He drew away with a gasp. "Maribel told you how to take my temperature. Get those icy fingers away from my head." He eyed her hand with a lowered brow.

Slowly, as though she could steady the pitter patter of her heart, Della leaned in and placed her cheek on his forehead. He was warm but not hot. She drew away and chewed her lip. "I don't know what I'm doing. You should have stayed at Doc's."

"He is four houses away. There's no need for me to clog up their cabin or their table."

A laugh formed at the thought of them eating dinner around Bastien's unconscious body. *I'm becoming hysterical.*

"Can we go to sleep now? Doc said one hour, right?"

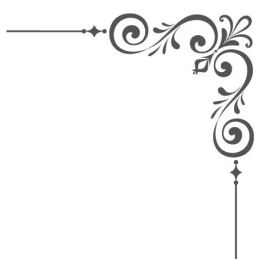
"Yes. I just ..." Della glanced around. The cabin was still frigid, and Bastien's blood loss meant he needed all the blankets.

He must have read her thoughts because he spoke in an exasperated tone. "I'm barely alive, woman. You can't possibly think it

inappropriate to lay next to me for one night.”

Della clicked her tongue. “Of course not.”

Sharing his bed for one night wasn’t inappropriate if it kept the man from dying. But it was dangerous. What would happen if she curled up beside him and realized she never wanted to leave?



Bastien



BASTIEN WOKE TO PAIN in his shoulder. Once he got his bearing, he glanced at Della, who was holding his arm against her face the way she often held her pillow. Her nose was pressed against his bicep and her mouth was open, breathing deeply.

The full moon lit the cabin's interior with translucent light. He lay, in tense silence for a moment until his body couldn't take the pain any longer.

"Della," he whispered.

She hummed in her throat and smacked her lips. A smile worked its way through the pain, and he allowed himself one more moment to watch her. Even asleep, she had his heart thumping in ways it shouldn't. When she still didn't wake, he cleared his throat.

"Della, I need you to take my temperature," he whispered, thinking a chore would move her to action.

She gasped, lifting her head from his arm as he grunted in pain.

Della wiped her mouth with the back of her hand in a most unladylike fashion and blinked at him. When her gaze fell on how she'd been cuddling with his arm, her lips parted, and she pushed back as if burned.

He groaned, her every movement was agony. Whatever Doc had given him for the pain had worn off.

"My temperature?" he asked.

Della made her way to her knees. Her loose hair brushed his chest wafting her lavender scent towards him. She placed her cheek on his forehead.

"You don't feel hot, but you're sweating."

"That's because the pain is killing me." He rolled his lips inward and bit down on them, trying to focus on anything other than the throbbing that radiated from his shoulder through his chest. In his attempt to distract himself, he noticed she was shivering. "You better get back under the covers." He winced, wishing he could reach out and encourage her, but the pain was already too much.

Della's eyes roved over him, surveying everything from his condition to how close they were.

Instead of tucking herself back into bed, she padded across the

room to put a log on the fire.

"It's out," she groaned.

"Della." He spoke with as much authority as a bedridden man could. "Please, come here and lie down. I'm in pain, and I cannot take any nonsense." He hoped playing on her sympathies would work, since his demands did not.

She came back over, her shoulders hitched to her ears against the cold. "I was only going to make you some tea. We have a bit left from my tooth. I thought maybe it would help."

"Yes, well, I'd rather sleep just now. The sun isn't even up yet."

Della slid into the covers. She was careful not to touch him, but the cold from her clothes still reached him. They both lay on their backs, like two fallen logs. Stiff and cold.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into the dark.

Bastien, still wide awake, blinked, turning his head to search for her face through the dark. "Why?"

"I tricked you and made you agree to this charade." She exhaled with a whimper. "You gave me a fright last night. I thought you might die, and here, I'd ruined the last of your life." She rolled on her side to face him. "I'm so sorry. I didn't think. I just knew I couldn't go back." Her last word was nearly inaudible, and he longed to draw out whatever distressed her.

"Why?" Since he couldn't see her face, he hoped the cover of darkness would add a sense of anonymity when he asked, "What happened that made you leave?"

The silence that stretched between them made the bed they shared seem even smaller. Della drew a steadying breath and finally said, "He was going to kill me."

Bastien forgot about his injuries and reached for her hand underneath the covers. He winced at the pain and focused on a slow pattern of inhale and exhale until the throbbing subsided. Once he could speak, he asked, "He would have killed you? Your father?"

A heat Bastien had never experienced raged through his heart. He clenched his jaw. Della was petite, and couldn't likely fight off a woman, let alone a man.

The sound of her head moving against the cotton pillow told him she nodded. "I ran to my aunt's house. She took me in, but we knew I couldn't stay. She showed me James's ad, and we wrote to him." Della sighed.

The truth jabbed him smack-dab in the center of Bastien's heart. *I've misjudged her.*

He'd allowed his first impression to hold when he should have been taking her at face value this whole time. The foolish woman he'd originally thought she was didn't exist. Instead, she was fierce and

brave. Della had endured much more than a battle. She'd lived through a war.

He squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry."

She gave a "tsk," and a slight shake of her head.

"No. I understand now. I don't want you to feel badly for being here. I'd like to think if I'd known your circumstances I would have suggested the plan myself."

Della squeezed his hand in return. He listened to her breathing, hoping for another word, another peek into her tortured past so he could complete the puzzle that was Della Hampton. But as the pale oval of her face grew brighter in the dark, her breathing slowed to a deep, steady pace. She'd fallen asleep, lightened, he hoped by her confession. He reached out to her through the pain and traced the outline of her face from temple to chin. "You're safe now," he whispered into the night, grateful she couldn't hear his sugary words and knowing he'd do whatever he could to protect her.

The next morning Bastien sipped his tea while Della dusted the furniture. The fire was finally chasing the ice from the boards, and deep contentment settled over Bastien.

A knock sounded, and Della set aside her rag to answer. The doctor strode past her and approached Bastien, who lifted his tea, saying, "It's the same blend you gave us for Della's tooth."

"Good." Doc reached for the cup, setting it aside to examine Bastien, who was still bare-chested from the night before. Doc removed the bandages to check the wound before applying fresh gauze. "Any dizziness?"

Bastien shook his head. "Only a bit of a headache."

"All right. Take it easy these next few days. A cut like this can fester, so I'll be by every morning to change your dressing." He smiled at Della. "The tea was a good idea. I'll have Maribel make you more."

After Doc left, Della plucked Bastien's mug of tea from the table and offered it to him.

"Can you help me sit up a bit more first?" He winced as he shifted his hips towards the head of the bed.

Della returned the saucer to the table and lifted her hands, moving forward only to hesitate as though she didn't know how to help.

Bastien gave her a knowing look. "Slide those pillows up a bit."

The moment Della fluffed them in place, Bastien sank into them with a sigh, leaning his head against the crude log that served as a headboard.

"Can I help you into a shirt?"

Bastien chuckled. "Does my nakedness bother you?"

"In fact, it does." Della lifted her chin and pursed her lips. "I don't know where to look, and the doctor won't need to see your wound

again until tomorrow morning. Surely, you can't stay like this until then. It's too cold."

The corners of Bastien's lips twitched. Knowing her, she added the part about being cold to satisfy his pragmatic side. Realization dawned on him. He was beginning to know her in the most intimate way. He understood her thoughts before she spoke them. Just how hard would it be to see her go? Four months, at most, until they would both be moving on. Before, it felt like too much. Now, it began to feel like too little.

As Della helped him with his shirt, her fingers grazed his bicep and she flushed the most adorable pink. He could read her mind, yet again, and it seemed to be occupied along the same line as his own—each sweet, innocent brush of her skin against his.

Once Bastien was settled and had his tea, Della stood with a sigh. "Is there anything else you need?" Her gaze moved around the room searching for a task.

"Read to me?"

Della's face was slack as though he'd struck her. "I ... I can't."

Bastien shook his head, "You can't read? But you corresponded with James."

"Yes, well, my aunt helped with that. I stopped going to school when I was seven. After my mother died, my father needed me at home. I can read small words here and there, but I've already tried to read your books. I can't."

Bastien inhaled as he took in more details of her stark upbringing. Reading was such a basic part of his education. He found it difficult to imagine a life without the skill. He calculated the years. Her age had been bothering him ever since she refused to reveal it.

"You're eighteen." He gave her a smug smile.

She scoffed and knit her eyebrows as though she would swat him. "How dare you—"

"What? Do the math? I was bound to learn your age eventually."

"Not necessarily. You and I will be parting ways. You for Angelica and me for a more ..."

"Yes?" Just where did she think she'd be going after this?

"A less complicated marriage with a man whom I won't be required to pretend to love, a man I won't be required to love at all."

She thought of marriage like a business deal. For a woman of her station, it might be the safest outlook. He shuddered to consider the type of man she could land herself with. He could be exactly like her father. Bastien knew abuse wasn't uncommon, and many women and children lived their entire lives in its grip. It was a sad truth and one that, if he could help it, he wouldn't see Della fall to again. "How *are* you going to find a husband?"

She shrugged.

"You can't just go around demanding men marry you until one finally agrees."

"Why not?"

He laughed at her innocence.

The small smile on her lips said she knew more than she let on. "I know beauty is subjective, and you may not think me beautiful, but this will not be the first time my looks have been used as an advantage."

"I do too think you're beautiful," Bastien said, all traces of his merriment gone.

"Well, thank you." She brushed off the compliment. "Now, please show a little faith. It can't possibly be difficult to find a better man than my father."

Bastien recalled her confession the night before. A father who would kill in anger. It was bad, but, "There are worse men." Something rushed through Bastien's body. A physical urge to protect her, like a medieval knight with a sword and shield. A young woman wouldn't have any idea what men were capable of, especially here in the west, where the bulk of a man's experience with a woman was from behind the closed door of a brothel. He closed his eyes against his own experience in such an establishment, his own treatment of the women inside.

"I just want one who makes enough to keep us fed and doesn't knock me around more than once a month. I don't plan to love him. It only hurts worse when you love him." When her voice fell, Bastien's chest seemed to be entirely too tight for his beating heart.

A heaviness settled in the room, and when he spoke, Bastien's voice was low. "You have to reach higher than that. There are good men out there."

She pursed her lips and gave him a doubtful stare. "If there are, then find me one." She pulled the armchair closer to the fire and sat. Her gaze was heavy as though she were weighing her next words. "Find me a man to marry."

"No." He answered with equal seriousness.

"Because they don't exist." Della lifted her hands, only to drop them to her lap. "The world gives men too much power. It goes to their head one way or another."

Bastien couldn't deny her claims. He had been that exact man just a few years ago. He had wielded his power without regard for consequences.

Della plucked debris from her skirt. "You're going to Montana after your role as foreman is learned. Nobody knows us there. You could be my doting older brother and find me a man to your satisfaction."

He studied her face with a tender expression, a tang of bitterness bloomed on his tongue. He sipped his tea, but the taste remained. "I can't be your brother, Della. We can't just keep lying to everyone all the time. It's bad for the soul."

Della gave a hard laugh, "My soul? That's the least of my worries. Religion can come once my basic needs are met. Food. Shelter. Safety. I've never had those things."

A pang of pity was followed by irritation. Bastien longed to stand over her, to shout at her to stop playing victim. "Don't you have all of those things right now?" Frustration built at his inability to tower over her as he made his case. He'd always used his stature to gain the upper hand. Possibly much the same way she used her beauty. It was a tool, one honed through years of trial and error.

"Not for long. Soon you'll be in Montana and our lie will be far behind you."

"I'm planning to live there with Angelica," he said, reminding himself almost as much as her. He tried, but he couldn't conjure the image of Angelica living with him in Montana. She belonged in the city and any time he imagined coming home after a day's work, it was Della who waited for him. He brushed the disturbing thoughts away. "She knows you aren't my sister. A lie can't be kept forever."

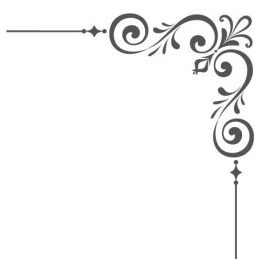
Della shifted.

He hoped the ruse they were living made her uncomfortable. He certainly didn't like lying to his friends. But Lydia was Della's friend too. "Without truth, there is no relationship. Doesn't it bother you, lying to your friends?" He studied her profile.

Della let out a bleak laugh. "These people would reject me if I didn't belong to you."

Bastien wanted to bring up Lydia and the friendship they had formed over these last two months, but something in Della's face told him to let her have this one. Instead they both sat in silence as Della ran a pleat in her skirt through her fingers. He remembered how those fingers ran through his hair.

"I owe them nothing." Her hoarse whisper brought him back to reality. She was right. The world had not been fair to her. Who was he to expect anything but survival from her. He determined how he could help her solve her problems. What they had now was only a bandage, something to keep infection from the wound. True healing would take time and tender care. He only hoped he could find it.



Della



DELLA TRIED TO FORGET their conversation, to chase it from the corners of her mind where it hid like a pesky mouse, but he had awakened something in her. Some people might call it hope. To Della, it was futile. Living as Mrs. Graham had given her a taste of respect, and, yes, those other things she'd mentioned—food, shelter, but not safety. Never safety.

Before she'd come here, the most she ever hoped to get from someone was kindness. Now, she wasn't sure if she could ever be content in that life. She had been a fool to live above her station, even as a facade. Her life in Omaha was what she should expect, not gifts and conversation and friendship.

A knock on the door pulled her from her reverie. She opened it, hoping it didn't wake Bastien. Della stepped out onto the porch, crossing her arms against the cold air.

Lydia pulled Della into her arms. "How is he?"

The pressure of the woman's arms around her on the heels of Bastien's words about friends brought tears to Della's eyes. Her aunt had been the closest woman in Della's life. Until now. As Lydia pulled away and looked into Della's eyes the tears that had threatened, spilled forth. Bastien was right, lying to these people was harder than she thought.

"Oh, darling. Doc said he's going to be okay." Lydia brushed a lock of hair that had stuck to her damp cheeks. "Is he sleeping?"

Della nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"Come to my house. Simon bought me sipping chocolate. It begs to be shared with a companion."

Lydia laced her arm through Della's and the two walked along the main street. Della glanced back at the cabin. People would talk. Her man was laid low and she was traipsing off to the neighbor's, leaving him to fend for himself. She knew it was wrong. But heaven help her, she needed a moment away from him, away from his talk of guilt, the feelings of hope he inspired, and more dangerous than the rest, the desire to have what she never could—him. Him? No. Not him. Of course, not him. But the life he represented, yes. That's what she desired.

“Doc told you he’s going to be okay? Does everyone know?”

Lydia gave a small laugh, a cloud of hot breath punctuating the noise. “You really must learn a bit more about this little town. There are no secrets.”

Della stiffened and glanced at her friend.

Lydia watched her again, sharp eyed and thoughtful. Then, as if she’d made up her mind, she turned away and opened the door to her cabin.

Milo was nowhere in sight and little Bridget slept in the drawer-turned-bassinet. Della walked over and watched the child, sucking her lips in sleep as though dreaming of the milk that sustained her.

“She’s asleep.” Della contained her excitement in a whisper.

“She’s been much better lately. I’m actually getting sleep at night. It’s amazing how quickly things can turn around with a true rest.”

Lydia pressed a hot mug into Della’s hands and they both sat at the table.

“I wanted to speak with you, about that trapper who came by. I haven’t been able to shake the thoughts from my head, and I hoped you could add some clarity to the situation.”

Della tucked her lips between her teeth as though her body was trying to prevent the words that longed to tumble out of her. The little she’d revealed to Bastien last night gave her a taste of honesty, of how someone could understand her if given all the information. Only, she hadn’t given him everything. Once he knew it all, he’d surely hogtie her and haul her down the mountain, like that bounty hunter. No man would forgive such an offense against his own gender, not even one who seemed so gentle and caring as Bastien. Luck had gotten her to this point, and she wasn’t going to press it by revealing any more than was absolutely necessary.

“He mentioned a wanted poster for a woman. Do you know her? Is she a threat to you? Is that why you came to Kirwin at the first?”

Della’s heart thundered in her chest. She cursed herself for not going through every possible scenario before now. To live a lie takes preparation and thought. She was so busy enjoying her brief foray into domestic bliss, she hadn’t planned on queries from Lydia or anyone besides Bastien.

“The only person I’m afraid of is my father. He might try to find me.”

Lydia gave a slow nod. “Why? Most fathers are glad to be rid of another mouth to feed.”

“Yes, mine is glad of that, but the snake likes to get more out of me when he can.”

“How do you mean?”

Della heaved a sigh. Unwilling to lie to this woman who both

seemed to care about her and was too sharp for an unrehearsed lie. Unlike Bastien, Lydia didn't seem inclined to believe her half-truths, so she told as much truth as she could. "I am a widow. My father traded me for forgiveness of his gambling debts to my late husband."

"You mean he *sold* you?" Lydia shouted and jumped to her feet. When the baby gave a cry from the corner, her eyes widened and she sat back down.

Della's heart warmed at her friend's defense of her mistreatment. "Yes."

"Now he wants to do it again?"

"Well, I haven't given him the chance."

"But now you are married, and he cannot touch you. Surely he is too old to win at fists against Bastien."

"Yes." Della chewed her lip. If they were truly married, Della was Bastien's property and therefore untouchable to her father. Where was the risk?

Lydia's eyes narrowed. "What are you not saying?"

"Lydia, I'm very upset about Bastien. My mind is muddled and I cannot think clearly."

"Does Bastien know this? About your father? Your late husband?"

Della pinched the bridge of her nose. "He does not. He thinks me too young to have been married and widowed. I've told him my father was what I ran from."

"And who are you truly running from? Or what?"

Della's throat went dry. This woman should work for the police, forcing the truth from criminals. "Lydia, I cannot do this now."

"Nonsense. I'm only beginning to get the truth from you. Truth which I know you have withheld. Only I know not why."

Della stood, her heart beating in her ears and her mug of chocolate hardly touched. "I must see to Bastien." As she spoke his name she stopped and turned to Lydia. "I should not have said anything. Forget this."

"I will not keep your lie. Not when I don't understand it myself. Bastien is dear to our family. You are wrong if you think yourself above him in our affection."

Della turned to face Lydia, her eyes cold.

Lydia looked pointedly at the seat Della had just vacated. "Now sit. I want the truth."

The truth. Della dropped back into her seat.

Lydia reached across the table and almost placed her hand over Della's. Instead, her fingers hovered, then dropped to the cold wood of the table. "I don't mean we don't love you too, but Bastien has become like a brother to us as we have both been so far from family." Lydia nodded, her face somber. "Go on."

“My husband is dead, and my father did trade, or sell, me to him.” Della swallowed through the lump in her throat. “He is dead now and not at my hands.” Not really at her hands, anyway. She hadn’t meant to, at the very least. “Though I am wanted for his murder.”

Lydia knit her brows. “Why?”

Della shook her head at the unfairness. “Because he has several buddies in the police. I didn’t wait to see what they would do. I didn’t expect this. Mostly I expected interrogation and a future at my father’s hands once more. So I ran.”

“How did he die?”

Della’s face fell. Once again she would have to tell the truth and hope this woman understood. “He was coming at me, to hurt me, and I tried to defend myself. The intention was enough to cause him alarm. He moved away and tripped over a wooden stool.” Della closed her eyes at the image. Though she loathed the man, the memory still caused her stomach to roil. “He was a tall man, and though the hearth stood only a hand’s-width above the floor, the edge was enough to kill him.”

“So you attacked him, and he fell to his death?”

Della cringed at Lydia’s simple deduction of the facts. “Yes, but I didn’t even strike him, I was only defending myself. He was going to kill me. I’d never seen him so wicked.”

Breathing seemed harder and she gulped for air and pressed her eyes closed. She glued herself to her seat, and every muscle in her body shook with the effort not to run away and not to open her eyes. Because if she did, she’d see Lydia’s face, and she couldn’t stand to see the censure and hate that must be there.

“And you didn’t wait to tell the police?”

“I didn’t dare. I know enough to know a woman is not allowed to resist her husband. They expect us to lie down and take whatever we are given.”

Lydia huffed. “I know what you mean, better than you might think.”

Della risked opening her eyes. “Not Simon?” Della struggled to meld Simon with the image of Walker.

“No. My own father.”

Della nodded. Lydia’s early marriage made all the more sense now.

“So you got away before the police found you? You were not identified on your way here?”

“I don’t think so.” As she spoke, she remembered the postmaster who’d helped her correspond with her aunt. There was no chance he hadn’t recognized her. She brushed it away, knowing there would be no way for him to know where she was now.

“And you *know* there is a wanted poster for you?”

"I've seen it." Della gulped.

"What will happen if it comes to Meeteetse?"

"Once the mountain is open for traveling, Bastien and I will be gone, him to Montana, me to ... somewhere."

"What?" Lydia dipped her chin at the confession.

Della's shoulder fell and she released a slow breath. One truth and all her lies were unraveling like a spool of Lydia's wool. "We are not truly married. He agreed to play the role so I could stay in Kirwin until I knew what to do next."

Lydia blew through her lips. "It's a wonder you've kept this for so long. One untruth after another. I was bound to find out."

Della eyed her friend with a sliver of amusement. "I hope Simon never has cause to hide anything from you."

"I hope so too. Why have you not told Bastien everything?"

"Because he wouldn't have agreed to a false marriage to a woman the law defines as a murderess. Now ... I don't know how to give him the whole truth without him feeling the betrayal."

"Which it is."

"Yes." Della agreed. Bastien's words about lying to his friends was nothing compared to how Della was beginning to feel in regards to lying to him. "He only knows I have no other option, that I am on my own."

"Do you love him?"

A laugh bubbled out of Della, her pent-up anxiety finding the most inappropriate escape. "No, we aren't even lovers. He is most self-controlled."

Lydia pressed her lips together. "You should tell him everything."

"I know, but I cannot figure how."

"It will come to you."

"Will you keep my secret? I am no danger to your dear friend. I may not love him, but I do care a great deal for him."

"No, I do not think you a danger. But I also doubt his indifference to you. Does he not love you?"

Della shook her head. "He loves his Angelica."

Lydia nodded, confirming Della's assessment of the situation. If Bastien showed any sign of not loving Angelica, Lydia would have sniffed it out. "You should find a way to tell him. He is a reasonable man, and if he does not love you, he certainly cares for you."

"Maybe," Della conceded. The thought of breaking that affection, no matter how small, tightened her chest around her lungs. She stood. "I really should get back. I don't want him to wake with me gone."

Della gave Lydia a grim nod before showing herself out. As she walked the street, she kept her eyes down, unwilling to bear any more unexpected conversations.

“Della” a voice hailed from behind her.

Della turned slowly.

Sarah marched towards her from the entrance of the store. When she caught up to Della, she held a stack of books aloft. “I’m sure you’re in a hurry to attend your husband, but Mr. Graham wanted these, and I figured he wouldn’t be by to collect them.”

“Thank you.” Della accepted the books, wondering what it might be like to read them.

“Can I do anything? We all feel so badly about his accident.”

Della glanced towards Bastien’s cabin, thinking about the man who lay inside. Bastien was coming to mean much more to her than she should allow.

When Della returned her gaze to Sarah, she responded with a curt nod. “He’s strong.” An image of Bastien’s bare chest and arms made Della’s stomach flip. She swallowed and closed her eyes.

“Okay, well, anything you need ...” Sarah’s earnest face made Della’s heart ache. Somehow Bastien had planted the seed of remorse at the most inconvenient time. It was as though all around her begged her to reconsider her actions. As she trudged through the snow she wished her heart were still as cold as the white powder at her feet.

Bastien was awake when she returned. “Some books for you from the Tewksburys.” Della set them on the bookshelf.

“They’re actually for you.” Bastien’s face held an eager expression. “I ordered them when I thought the only reason you weren’t reading what I had was because you weren’t interested. I’d be happy to help you with any words, or even a lesson if you’d like.”

Della’s attitude darkened. She tore the jacket from her body and stomped across the cabin. “I need you to stop being nice to me,” she murmured, unable to meet his eyes.

He chuckled. “What?”

“This was a mistake. Being here with you. It makes me *want* things. Things a girl like me will never have.” She laughed miserably and tossed a hand in the air. “I would have been better served to work in one of those brothels in Meeteetse. At least *there* I would have been happy with whatever came next.”

“You’d rather be a prostitute than live here with me? Have I been so bad to you?”

“No.” Della rushed to correct his thinking. “I just ... life will never be as good as it is now.” With him.

“I hope you are wrong.” He didn’t deny her words outright. In his heart, he must know that her destiny held bruises, not banknotes. “I’ll do it.” His voice was stern. “I’ll find you a husband in Montana, but I’m not lying to anyone.”

Della cocked her head in disbelief. “You’re fooling me.”

“I’m not fooling you. Nobody, not even my worst enemy, should live the life you have planned for yourself.”

“I don’t have it planned. I’m just managing my expectations.” She chewed her lip, imagining who Bastien might find. Maybe a miner in the Graham family mine. “How will you tell them you know me? No man would believe I wasn’t your whore all these months. I hardly believe it myself.”

“He will have to believe me. Otherwise I won’t choose him. I won’t have someone who thinks you or I are liars.”

“But we are.”

Bastien gave a frustrated snort. “He’ll have to be a patient man.”

After stopping at the store for ingredients, Della returned to the cabin to find it empty. Della’s arms were full and so was her heart. The snow still packed hard and cold beneath her boots as she made her way home from the store, but she barely noticed it. Each breath filled her lungs with fresh air and her confession to Lydia had not, somehow, broken their friendship. In fact, that very night she and Bastien would play guests to Lydia and Simon’s hosts. A dinner party! She’d never imagined such a thing for herself before. She pushed open the cabin door. “Bastien!”

No answer. She frowned and glared at the empty cabin. Empty? Where could he have gone? Her shoulders sagged. After only a few short days, she’d grown accustomed to his presence. The room was too still without his towering form. She shook her head. She ought to get used to it, Spring was coming and it wasn’t as though he were a stray kitten she could keep.

Della got to work on the pecan pie. Crust first, then filling. With the leftover crust, she used Bastien’s smallest knife and cut tiny pieces into the shape of leaves. She cut the outlines from her memory. She made variegated ones like the ash tree from one of their neighbor’s yard at home. She squiggled the lines of the oak at the nearest park where her brother once climbed too high, and they had to call the fire department to get him back down. Last, she carved the star of the maple tree from the cemetery where her mother rested.

Della’s heart sank at the thought of her mother. After spending time with Lydia and her new baby, she knew Bastien was right. Della had to hope for something better. It was a miracle she hadn’t fallen pregnant during her marriage to Walker, though with his constant beatings, she likely wouldn’t have been able to carry a baby full term. When she married again, she would eventually become pregnant, and thoughts of her unborn children encouraged her hope.

Bastien entered the cabin, a broad smile on his face. “Can you come with me?”

Della couldn’t help but respond with a grin. He had that same

childish happiness that he'd shown before the hunt.

"All right." She placed one towel over her intricately carved leaves and another towel over the pie shell waiting to be baked. It could wait.

When she turned to him, Bastien had her jacket open and waiting for her to slip inside. His joy was infectious, and a bubble of excitement grew in her chest for whatever was to come. He pulled her along at his usual too-fast pace. Della kept up, clinging to his arm to stay upright.

Finally, they arrived at the smokehouse, and he pulled her inside the small space. She wrinkled her nose at the smell. The smoke wasn't strong enough to chase away the stench of death. Della covered her nose with her sleeve, focusing on its leather scent

"Yeah, the stench is bad, but look." He waved his hand at a huge brown wall. Della stared for a moment before she realized what it was. The bearskin stretched almost as wide as she was tall and taller than Bastien. Along the center was a ridge of lighter and longer brown fur.

"*This* was what attacked you?" Her knees turned to jelly. "How did you possibly ..." She stopped, a lump in her throat preventing her from saying more.

"They hauled it down the mountain, and Karsten here skinned it for me. I hope you want something furry. Maybe a rug for the house."

Della eyed him. She shouldn't be deciding what went inside his house. Karsten wasn't in sight. Nevertheless, she attempted to keep up the ruse.

"Whatever you want, darling." She sidled closer to him, preferring his familiar musk to the smell of the smokehouse.

He smiled down at her, and ushered her outside, saying, "We got two elk before the bear got me. He probably smelled the meat. Thanksgiving is in less than a week. The spread will be bountiful this year."

"I'm glad. I only wish you hadn't tried to pay for it with your life. How could you possibly have gone after an animal that large?"

"I didn't go after *him*. He came after *me*. Well, my horse. My lead horse was carrying a deer carcass." Bastien gestured with his hand. "He should have been in hibernation, but he must have been hungry. Either way, he was nice and fat."

Back at the cabin, Bastien lay on his bed with one hand behind his head and a goofy grin on his face. The other arm rested in a sling to protect his injury. Although he was healing, he still had to keep his stitches from stretching.

Della checked the oven temperature and added a small log. She finished the pie, pouring the pecan mixture into the shell and covering

it with the leaves she'd cut. The dark filling underneath showed through like rich earth under a bed of autumn leaves. She placed the pie in the oven and closed the door, brushing sugar from her hands.

She took pride in her baking, and why not? She was good at it, everyone said so. If Della could find the right town, she might be able to set up a cafe or a bakery. She was only one person and didn't need much. Maybe she could sell her things here and start making a bit of money to get herself started. Bronco Nell was able to make more than a living and also care for her daughter. If she could make it alone, why not Della?

Della swung her gaze to the bed and its occupant. Bastien had fallen asleep, a cocky, self-satisfied grin on his lips. The pride of ownership must have worn him out. She surveyed the plank flooring and wondered if the bearskin rug would even fit. She'd seen one in a picture book whose head was attached and was glad Karsten had removed it from Bastien's trophy. It would be terribly impractical to have to step over a bear head all the time. Not to mention the nightmares.

Bastien should save the rug until he finished his three years of servitude. This was just a blip in his life and would soon be forgotten. Della pursed her lips, staring at the floor. There was no use ruining the rug's future with mud from the mine. Just like Della, he wouldn't want to carry those marks with him when he made his new life in Montana.

"What are you thinking?" Bastien's voice made her jump.

"I thought you were asleep." Della huffed, catching her breath. "I was thinking you should save your bearskin rug for Montana."

He laughed and sat up. "Not a fan of the bear, huh? We don't need to put it inside. Is that all you were thinking? You seemed more ... contemplative than that."

Della took a deep breath. "Actually, I was thinking of some way to earn a bit of money. I'll need it when we separate. Maybe I could do something like Bronco, run a business of sorts."

Bastien lifted a brow. "I hope you aren't thinking of liquor."

"No. Baked goods. I could sell them here and get an idea of what people like best, then do the same wherever I decide to live." The idea of her deciding for herself where she wanted to live stirred a warmth in her chest. If she continued West, maybe others would feel like Lydia in regards to hunting down women and the town wouldn't even hang the wanted posters. If she came to a place with a bit of money as a widow, nobody would know her past. They would think her their equal and she could start afresh.

"Heaven knows you bake good enough to sell. I think it is a wonderful idea."

Della brought her hand to her mouth. "Do you?" She knew he liked her cooking, but selling something was entirely different than getting it for free.

He nodded and ran a hand through his hair. "I had an idea too."
"Oh?"

"I think we should tell Lydia and Simon the truth."

Della took a step backwards, her stomach dropping. Lydia's advice to come clean nagged at her.

"I know you doubt your worth among these women. Only the Lord knows why. But I am certain that Lydia is not like you describe."

"I never—Lydia has always been kind to me."

"They are both from Wyoming and might assist in finding you a husband once we need to leave here. They can keep a secret for a few months."

"And if they choose not to keep our secret?" Della hoped Lydia could feign as well as she could think.

Bastien shrugged a shoulder. "Then we move on early. The ride out will be treacherous, but I've learned much about you since that first day. I think you could handle it."

Della chewed her lip as she tamped down the desire to reveal all to Bastien. Lydia was a woman. Her understanding of the situation was understandable. Men stuck together, just like the police who knew of Walker's abusive ways yet created a wanted poster with *her* face.

"You do them an injustice by doubting their loyalties. You think they would not accept you, but thus far the prejudice has only gone one way."

Della sighed, guilt wriggling in her belly. "Okay. If you feel strongly, you have my permission to tell them."



ONCE EVERYONE HAD EATEN their fill at the Skinner's, Della followed Lydia up to the loft to ready the children for bed. She placed a hand on Lydia's arm. "Bastien wants to tell you and Simon about the marriage."

Lydia cut her eyes to Della. "You've not told him the rest?"

Della shook her head. Lydia pursed her lips in obvious disapproval. "Okay."

As Della dressed Milo in his nightclothes, the deep tone of Simon's voice downstairs reached them in the loft.

"Men are talking," Simon said. "They knew of James's ideals for a union. Briggs says James attended a Wobbly conference during his leave in June."

"Can you blame him?" Bastien's voice rose in frustration. "I myself hope for better working conditions for these men. I only succeeded in

gaining stronger framing because the cave-in last month held Schnitzel's sympathy. But we should not need to wait for the death of another one of us to better the conditions."

"If Schnitzel doesn't quit being so tight fisted, he will surely have union on his hands."

"The problem is not Schnitzel, but his higher ups. The minerals come in pockets. When we hit one, it pays big and they can pay out shareholders, but then we go months with nothing. It's just too unpredictable. Soon the owners will have trouble finding investors for the Kirwin Mining Company."

Up in the loft Milo placed a hand on Della's cheek, turning her to face him. When they made eye contact, he whispered, "Can you tell me a story?"

"Of course." Della tapped his nose.

While Lydia nursed Bridget, Della spoke in hushed tones, hoping to soothe Milo. As she did this, she ran her finger along the bridge of his nose and around his face and forehead. Milo's eyes began to droop. Before Bridget had even finished nursing, Milo was asleep.

"You're hired." Lydia smiled as Della walked past to climb down the ladder and join the men.

Bastien spoke to Simon but raised his warm gaze to greet Della. "Della said you and Lydia might have been looking for a girl for me. Before she arrived, of course." He was seated and reached his arm around her once she stood next to him. She leaned into his embrace, enjoying a touch that was fast becoming both too familiar and too comfortable.

Simon laughed. "You know Lydia. She schemes."

Bastien lifted his chin to meet Della's eyes. His were filled with mischief. "I'm hoping her scheming can work *for* us this time. Simon, you're my closest friend."

Della glanced between Bastien and Simon. She wondered if Bastien's heart was racing as hers was.

Bastien seemed easy, though. "I'm going to tell you something and I want your complete discretion."

Simon remained silent.

Della hardly dared breathe.

Bastien leaned back in his chair. "When Della came to us, she was in danger from her father. She could not return home when the news of James's death was revealed."

Simon crossed his arms and rocked onto the back legs of his chair. "So, you married her?" His face was smug.

"No. We aren't married, just pretending to be so she can have some time to figure out her next move. She'll leave in the spring when I go, too."

Simon let his chair fall with a thunk. Did he think about the news or about the possibility of a promotion come spring? Simon was the likely choice to take Bastien's place.

All eyes were drawn to the ladder which led to the loft. Lydia made her way down. Della's nervousness at Simon's reaction was nothing compared to her fears about Lydia.

Lydia stopped at the bottom and placed her hands on her hips. "Not married?" She surveyed Della with hooded eyes. "I figured a marriage of convenience, but this ..."

Della released a sigh of relief at Lydia's acting.

Bastien nodded tightly. "We are married in word only. I sleep on the floor."

Della's gaze dropped at Bastien's lie. True they weren't lovers, but they currently slept in the same bed while his injury healed.

Lydia gave a muted, "hmm" as though she were planning. "If she hadn't come into town telling everyone her intention, we could have found a way. I have three sisters. We could have pretended she was one of them."

"Are single sisters allowed?" Della shot an accusatory glance at Bastien. He had given the impression that there were zero exceptions made for that rule.

"No. Schnitzel is extremely strict. No women. No alcohol. No gambling."

Della rolled her eyes. "He makes it seem like the good Lord wouldn't even approve of us as a people. We are merely walking temptations."

"It may not be right," Bastien said, "but it's not just Schnitzel's rule. Many of the women here appreciate the sentiment. There are wide differences between women in the west. It might be years before that gap is bridged." He tucked his chin and gave Della a hard stare. "You didn't exactly give me time to find a solution. We were less than an hour away from Kirwin with a blizzard on our heels."

Simon's voice was a calm counter to the thumping of Della's heart. "What does Angelica think of this?"

Bastien flattened his mouth and bobbed his head to the side. "She doesn't know. No mail has come or gone since that day."

Lydia crossed her arms. "No plans to marry come spring?"

Bastien's jaw twitched. "No. I'll move out to Montana, or possibly back to Chicago for a bit, and leave Della wherever she'd like to start her own life. It is for that life which we seek your assistance now. Della has asked that I help find her a husband." He stroked his chin.

A flash of appreciation shot across Lydia's face. "Oh?"

Simon laughed. "Matchmaker. What's that book you like, Lydia?"

"*Emma*." Lydia didn't take her eyes from Della, surveying her like a

cat eyeing its prey. "And it didn't work out well. I object to all of this." Lydia sliced her hand through the air as she walked towards them. She sat on Simon's knee with the confidence of a woman utterly loved. Della tried not to envy this woman who had a better life than Della could ever hope for.

Lydia continued. "A lie never lasts. What will happen to her reputation when you are discovered? What about yours?" She dipped her head to catch Bastien's gaze. "You've lied to everyone. You've flouted the rules. A rule that every lonely man in that mine resents."

"We won't be discovered. How would that happen?"

"Angelica could show up here. Aren't you promised?"

"No." Bastien's voice was quiet.

Della leaned forward at this new information.

Lydia's eyes flashed to Della before she spoke. "That's news to me. Have you broken it off?"

"When I arrived, you women were full of questions. I thought it would close the subject if I said engaged instead of just intended."

Lydia bobbed her head to each side. "Well, you were right. So, there's no chance she'll show up to collect her man?"

"I don't think so. Angelica doesn't like the outdoors." The corners of Bastien's mouth quirked up into a tiny grin, expressing an amusement Della couldn't share.

She absorbed the information like a sponge. Angelica had been a non-topic from the beginning. While part of her longed to hear more, the other parts would rather stuff cotton in her ears.

"And you, Della?" Lydia asked. "What could come here to haunt you?"

Della suppressed a smile at Lydia's pretend interest. She almost believed Lydia was hearing this information for the first time. "My father doesn't know where I am."

Lydia lifted a brow. "You didn't seem so certain when that trapper came by. Who *does* know where you are?"

"My aunt. She told me about James."

"So, if she gives you up, your father could be here as soon as February."

It would be much worse than that. She could hang from the Meeteetse gallows.

"Yes," Della whispered.

Lydia tapped her index finger against her bottom lip. "And you don't love each other?"

Della and Bastien glanced at one another and shook their heads.

"Hmm." Lydia crossed her arms and looked at Simon. "What do you think, darling? Our friends have gotten themselves in a bit of a jumble."

Simon shook his head, raising his hands as though unwilling to partake in the disaster.

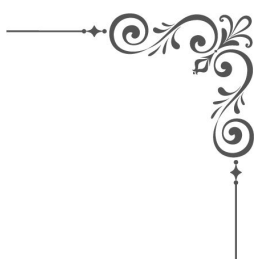
“Will you help us find her a husband?” Bastien asked, bringing them back to the point of the confession.

“I have sisters, but no brothers.” Lydia pursed her lips. “Simon’s are all married already, though I wouldn’t mind if Jeffrey’s wife left the family.” Her words, thick with sarcasm, tumbled from the side of her mouth.

Della met Lydia’s gaze, hoping to convey the gratitude that burned within her.

Lydia left her perch on Simon’s lap and sat next to Della, laying a warm hand on her arm. “I’m glad you told us.”

Della nodded, stunned at the ease of the conversation. His friends didn’t even mind that they’d been lied to. She supposed for someone like Bastien, the risk of losing one or two people would be painful, but not life-threatening. If only she weren’t so desperate, she could take the chance on giving Bastien the whole truth. Maybe, at this point, she could seek help from the Skinners if everything with Bastien fell apart. The thought tore at her heart. It was the loss of Bastien that she wouldn’t chance. Her time with him was already limited, could she really risk cutting it short and losing his protection, his kindness or his easy smiles?



Bastien



BASTIEN WOKE AGAIN to pain. And delight. Della had flung an arm and a leg across him and her head lay on his stitches. A dull ache radiated through his chest, and his stitches stung like the devil, but she smelled as good as an angel. Bastien inhaled, breathing in the scents of lavender and soap, her hair just beneath his nose. How he wished he could hold her, but he didn't dare. He lay there in the dark convinced that once she was awake, her affection would dissipate.

Instead, he closed his eyes and imagined their ruse was real. That they were married, and she held him because she loved him. His breath hitched in his throat. The desire for her to really be his came like a dunk in the horses' trough. His eyes flew open. For the first time he didn't conjure a thought for Angelica. Instead he let himself think only of Della and the future they might have together. Then he remembered she wanted to marry someone else, and she wanted his help to accomplish that goal. A part of him broke when he thought of marrying her off, but she had enough of her will taken from her. If he could help her gain the life she wanted, he would help her in whatever way he could.

Then Della stirred and started to wake.

At first Bastien faked sleep, letting her extricate herself without embarrassment. Still, he couldn't resist, and he rolled to face her asking, "How did you sleep?"

"Awful, actually. That bear haunted my dreams."

"My bear?" He quirked his mouth, letting a dimple blink in his cheek.

"The very one. I dreamed he came back for his fur. I know it doesn't make sense. He came here to get it."

"That is a nightmare. So was he fur-less?" Bastien laughed at the image only to hold his side with a groan.

"No." Della scrunched her face, trying to remember. "But he came for you again, and it was awful. I'm not good with blood."

He pinched her chin with his one hand and almost lost himself in her sherry-colored eyes. "I'm fine. I'm not bleeding anymore. The bear is dead, and I don't think their species holds vendettas."

She tucked her chin. "You make light of it, but you'd have

nightmares if someone you ... cared about showed up in the night with blood everywhere and wouldn't open their eyes."

He touched her cheek and smiled. "You care about me?"

She rolled her eyes and sat up, tossing a hand in the air. "Can you never be serious?"

She stood and started for the stove, and he tracked her movements, missing the warmth of her body and chastising himself for thinking of it.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't the one who had to worry, so the attack doesn't affect me as it does you. Will you still make me biscuits?" He smirked.

"Flattery will get you almost anywhere." Della gave him the tiniest of smiles.

"Good. I'll need those biscuits because I'm going to the mine today."

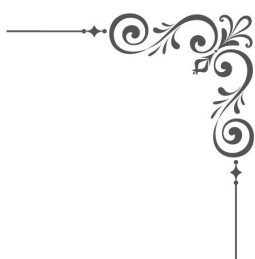
Della spun, eyes wide. "But you're in bandages still!"

A warmth grew in his belly. First, she said she cared, now she was worried. "I don't need to sling a hammer. I'm a foreman. I can do a lot of work without using my arm."

"Will you be home early?"

"No. I'm sure there is a lot to be done. I'll be late."

Her pleading eyes punched him in the gut. If he weren't careful, he might think that was what she wanted—more time with him. And allowing that thought to grow was a luxury not even a Graham could afford.



18

Della



DELLA ATE DINNER ALONE. She was frowning at one of the books Sarah dropped off, too distracted to comprehend what she was struggling to read when he finally came through the door.

"I was about to come in there and find you." She snapped the book closed and rose from her seat. She helped him remove his jacket, and the snow on his shoulders quickly melted in the cabin's warmth.

He stomped over to the table and pulled out a chair, falling into it. "Sorry," he breathed, leaning forward to tug on the laces of his work boots.

"Why aren't you in your sling?"

He fumbled with his boots before kicking them toward the entry. "I'm beat."

"Well, that's no shock. You've been out for nearly twelve hours." She stacked his boots more neatly by the door.

"I hate to ask, but can you check my dressing. It's been itching all day." He reached across his body, as though he was going to remove his shirt one-armed.

"Gracious, can't you wait one second?" Della ran to help pull off his shirt. She gently guided his arm from its sleeve, watching his face closely for any show of pain.

"I'm not made of glass."

Della ignored him, lifted the bandage, and peered underneath. The inside of the gauze was clean, the wound no longer oozing. His wounds were scabbing without any sign of infection. Della sighed. "I think it's healing." She peered closer at his wounds. "I'm sure Doc is still awake. I could ask him to come take a look."

"No. I just need sleep."

"And food?"

"And food," he agreed, smiling.

"And your sling," She pushed.

"In the pocket of my coat. I promise not to take it off again until Doc says."

Della smirked at her victory as she reached into his coat pocket for the sling. He needn't wear it to bed, but it would be ready for him in the morning. Bastien was a man unused to limitations.

It was a Saturday in December when Doc dubbed him healed. Bastien swung his arm in a circle as though proving to Della that he was fit again.

She laughed at his theatrics. "That's wonderful."

"There's a place I want to take you. It's not the lupine gardens, but it's the winter equivalent." It was a week until Christmas, and they hadn't had fresh snow in almost seven days.

"All right." She dropped her mending into her lap. "Would you like to go after lunch?"

"No, now. I picked up food from the cafe on my way home from Doc's." He stepped outside and returned with a lump of fabric. "Lydia lent these. You'll have to put them on."

Curious, Della accepted them from his outstretched hand and held them aloft.

"Breeches?" She folded them and passed them back. "I'm not wearing these. I'm shocked Lydia even owns a pair."

"You'll have to. You can't ride side-saddle while riding double."

Della raised her brows. "You can't possibly expect me to get on a horse."

"You're one of the bravest ladies I know."

Della found her seat again. "I actually have a lot of mending today. A not-quite-lupine garden will have to wait."

"But we have to celebrate." He pointed to his shoulder.

"Very well." She tilted her head. "Shall I watch you cut some logs? We've been living on charity for long enough."

"Remember when you said you would be an agreeable wife?"

She laughed. "That was for other people, and to be helpful to you and earn my keep. It didn't include adventures with hairy beasts."

Bastien pretended to be hurt, but his dancing eyes gave him away. "Is my chest so hairy that you call me a beast?"

They burst into a fit laughter.

"Just try," Bastien pleaded. "I promise if you're too scared, I'll let you down."

"Oh, all right."

He passed the pants back to her and bounded out the door.

When she slid them on, she knew she wouldn't be comfortable showing her legs to the town or him. She kept her skirt on over the top and gave the window a tap, their sign that she was dressed and he could return.

"They don't fit?" Bastien asked the moment he was inside. "Where are they?"

"They're on underneath. I'm not wearing *just* them."

He gave a short laugh. "I don't take issue with you wearing them."

"I'm not worried about you."

He chuckled and gathered his coat and hat from the rack. "Are you worried about the women or the men? I thought we already decided you can't marry any of these men."

"Oh, stop." She reached for her jacket, but Bastien grabbed it before she could. He rotated his finger, gesturing for her to spin and slip into it with his assistance.

The moment her last button was done, Bastien nodded toward the door. "Let's go."

Once outside, she faced a monster of a horse, its harness wrapped around the railing. She squeaked and jumped back. "*That's* what we're riding?"

"He's called a Percheron." Bastien took Della by the hand. "He's a draft horse and strong enough to carry us both."

Della gulped. Pleasing this man was becoming more challenging each week. Bastien led her off the porch, and they stood near the beast. It whinnied in response, huffing just over her head. Its hot breath rolled down her neck.

"I—"

"Della. It's going to be okay. Look." He leaned in, dipping his head so his cheek almost brushed against hers to share her perspective. He placed one hand between her shoulder blades. With the other, he pointed to a spot in the distance.

"We'll just ride to that thicket. If you still feel this way, we'll stop at the trees and have our picnic."

He must have taken her silence as acceptance because he placed his hands on her waist and spun her to face him. His eyes danced. "C'mon. Up you go." Without another word, he heaved her into the saddle.

Her breath left her in a huff as she landed. Her lips quivered. She had to be brave. Bastien thought her the bravest lady of his acquaintance, and she had to live up to that. For him. For herself. But for the life of her, she couldn't release her grip on his shoulders, even though it left her in a precarious position between man and beast.

Bastien caught her gaze. "You'll have to let me go so I can mount."

Della gave a definitive shake of her head. "I can't."

"Hold this." He placed one of her hands on the saddle horn, still holding fast to her left leg. "Can you swing that leg to the other side so you're straddling?" He eyed her other leg.

After much shifting and instruction, Della finally sat alone on top of the horse. Her skirt spread such that her calves would have been exposed if she weren't wearing Lydia's breeches. Her legs dangled near the stirrups.

With a swift movement, Bastien swung onto the horse and landed behind her with a grunt. The horse gave a few steady steps.

Della gasped and gripped the small horn. "This is not a sturdy enough handle."

"You can hold his mane as the Indians do." He wrapped an arm around her waist and held her back to his front. They couldn't possibly be closer to one another. But then he leaned in and they were. He whispered near her ear. "You have nothing to fear."

Tingles cascaded down Della's neck and affected parts of her she knew a lady wouldn't mention. She bit her lip and closed her eyes, thankful he was behind her so he couldn't see her expression. She wasn't sure if she was more afraid of falling for the man or from the beast.

Bastien released her, leaving her breathless at his proximity, and gave a click of his tongue. After a while, the loping gait of the massive horse was almost soothing. When Della's heart no longer attempted to beat its way out of her chest, she settled against Bastien's solid chest. One benefit of him being healed was that she would no longer have to fight the feelings that came when she saw him without a shirt.

They rode out of town and past the trees Bastien had set as a marker. Della had almost begun to like riding the horse when she noticed smoke coming out of the forest ahead of them. She turned her head slightly and asked, "Who is that?"

"That's where we're headed." He answered as though it were a place and not someone's fire.

They arrived at a steaming pool of water that was almost black against the snowbanks. Bastien leaned forward, breathing into Della's ear and causing bumps to lift along her arms. The saddle shifted, and his warmth disappeared as his boots hit the ground with a crunch.

"It smells awful." She clutched the saddle horn and scrunched her nose. Her confidence left the horse when Bastien did, but her legs were still on either side of the animal, and she couldn't reach for Bastien as she had that first day. With a little instruction, she swung her leg over the horse's rear, and Bastien placed his firm hands on her waist to help her slide from the animal.

"That's sulfur." He walked the horse to a tree and wrapped the reins around a branch. "I got something else from Lydia." Bastien pulled his hand from one of the saddlebags to offer her an unknown material. "Let's swim."

Della's eyes widened. "It's freezing."

"It's a hot spring." He gave her an incredulous look.

"Is that swimwear? I'm not getting undressed to put that on. I'd freeze first."

In the end, they settled on Della removing her stockings and riding trousers and using them as a seat while she dipped her bare legs. Bastien had worn his swimsuit instead of undergarments and dove in,

naked above his waist.

“Hot springs are said to hold healing properties. Whether that’s true or not, Doc says it will be good to soak my wound.”

“Are you truly healed? It still looks so angry.”

He swam over and tickled her toes, earning a shriek of delight. “I’m fit as a fiddle.” He arched and floated on the water.

Della swallowed, eyeing the scars still streaked across his chest. The reminder of that night still caused a hitch in her throat. His strength and size made her believe he was indestructible, yet every time she recalled that night, the comfort left, hollowing out her chest.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come in? It’s the warmest you’ll be all winter.”

“My legs are in, and they feel perfectly lovely.” Della swished the water.

Bastien swam close, almost grazing her legs. “My family thinks I’m mad to live here.” He sat up so only his shoulders were showing to dip his hands in the water and push it over his head, slicking his thick hair back.

Della stopped kicking her legs, her throat completely dry.

Bastien shook the water off like a dog and lifted his face to the vast sky above. “Out here, my heart is so full. If they would just come out, I’m sure they would feel it.”

Della’s eyes raked the forest, doing her best not to look at the one thing that called to her heart. She breathed in the view of the towering pines and the low scrub oak. Snow fell in tiny flakes the size of a letter in one of Bastien’s novels.

“Is Montana the same as here?”

“Don’t know. I haven’t been yet.”

Della chuckled with disbelief. “But you’ve been working all this time to get there. How do you know you want it?”

“It’s not the place so much as what it stands for—independence. I wish to create my own life, make choices that aren’t influenced by anyone else.”

“But you’ll have a wife to consider.” Della didn’t risk using Angelica’s name.

“Yes.” He heaved a sigh. “Do you hope your husband will consider you? Or would you rather he just made the hard choices and took the blame if they went wrong?”

Della twisted her mouth into a pout as she thought. “It’s nice to leave the hard stuff to someone else, but only if he’s wise. But if things turn sour, maybe he would appreciate the support of knowing it was my mistake as well.”

“You make it sound like a partnership.”

“You’re right.” Della shook her head. “That isn’t real.” She tried to

push away the memories of what *was* real. This place, with its still air and whispering pines was a veritable fairyland, and it muddled her mind. The only things missing were fireflies or fairy dust. She shrugged. "It's easy to believe anything here."

Bastien smiled. "It *could* be real. What else do you want in a husband?"

"I've told you."

"You've told me very little. Food and few beatings are not enough to make a person happy."

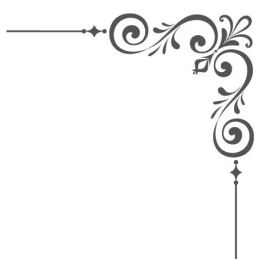
Della remembered the hunger of her childhood. Her dad drank or gambled much of their money away, and they were often left without food for days. There had been food with Walker, but his beatings were more intense and, once they started, became more and more frequent. The pain wasn't as great as her confusion. She'd loved him, or maybe just the idea of him. When he began hurting her, she'd always wondered, bewildered, what she'd done to cause it. She'd tried to correct even the smallest of things, but his temper had only worsened.

She kept her eyes on her hands. "I don't want to love him."

"Can we discuss why?" Bastien's voice was tentative, as though he knew her answer before she gave it.

"I'd rather not."

Someone with a life like Bastien's would never understand. Not with a thousand conversations. No matter her feelings for him, she would never be able to be enough for a man as wholesome as him.



Bastien



THE SNOW FELL THICK as they made their way back to town. A group of children on their way to the hot springs passed them with a wave. Della sat tall at the sight of them. Cold air touched the spot where their bodies once touched and without thought Bastien put his arm around her waist and pulled her back. He pressed his cheek against her hair to speak into her ear. "You're confused. You should lean *into* me when we see others, not pull away."

"They're only children."

"Then why did you bother moving at all?" He kept his arm around her, holding the reins with one hand. The horse knew the way home. There was little need to guide him. "Plus." He squeezed her. "You're warm." She was warm in so many ways. Her easy smile, her hot biscuits. Even the amber color of her eyes heated his insides.

She turned her head slightly. "I told you not to get your hair wet. You're going to catch your death." Despite her taunt, she relaxed into him once again.

When the silence stretched, he wondered if she'd fallen asleep until she spoke. "Thank you. This has been my favorite day."

"But you're on a horse." His grin was so wide, his face felt like it would split.

"Yes, well, that's part of it. I was so afraid, but it seems I didn't need to be."

He didn't want her to get the wrong idea. "They can be dangerous, but they're a might useful. It just depends on the horse. My mother had a mare that was gentle as a duckling. All of us children learned to ride on that horse."

"In Chicago?" Della turned her head so he could see her profile. "Oh, that's right. I forgot about your grandparent's place."

Bastien didn't correct her. She didn't need to know his family also had a manor in the country. "I keep thinking about what you said. About marriage being a partnership."

Her head brushed his chest as she shook it. "I never used that word."

"No?" Bastien couldn't remember exactly. He only recalled the warmth that had filled him when she spoke of deciding things

together and accepting the fall as one. "Well, whatever you said, it was a nice plan. One I should have followed back when the doc told us we had to pull your tooth."

She smiled, her eyes far away. "I was angry with you. I knew it was the right thing, but the way Doc spoke only to you. I felt like your property and not a breathing person who was about to endure serious pain. I wanted to blame you for that pain."

"I did pressure you into it. Then, all I knew of you was that you were reckless and foolhardy. Marriage to a stranger, sneaking into wagons, plotting a web of lies." *To name a few.*

Della shook her head, the scent of her hitting him like a wave. "The more I learn about you, the more surprised I am that you accepted my plan."

"I never told you, but you reminded me of my sister." He laughed. "Not so much in appearance or personality, but I thought of how I hoped someone would help her if she were desperate." He knew his sister would never be as desperate as Della, but only because she was a Graham. "I wouldn't have been able to live with myself knowing I sent you to a brothel."

"What if you can't find me a husband?" Her quiet voice was laced with genuine fear.

"You won't end up in a brothel. I promise. I'll help until you find your way." No matter how long it took.

"Your three years is almost over. Your wife won't want you helping me."

The town came into view, and the horse picked up speed, no doubt hungry after the long trip. Bastien had to remove his hand from her waist and take the reins. The horse didn't need the guidance, but his brain did. He could hardly keep Angelica in his mind before Della took over. He was glad for the brisk pace that took them to the stables and then his cabin.

They moved quietly through the motions. He built a fire and she changed her clothes. He ran a towel over his wet hair, shivering at the damp chill and she started dinner. He enjoyed the quiet companionship, the way they circled around each other and with each other, as if they danced to their own silent music. Did she notice it, too? How well they moved together?

Once they were settled and the cabin warm, Bastien stopped resisting Della's pull and took a seat next to her. She held her mending, her head bowed in concentration.

The pot on the stove bubbled, sending savory smells throughout the cabin. Bastien looked forward to whatever meal she had simmering. "I know you don't care much who you marry, but I want to play a game."

Della flicked her eyes to him and back to her chore.

"I want to know your ideal husband." Before she could object, he raised both hands to silence her. "I won't count anyone out, but I'd like to have an idea. No point working so hard just for you to be unhappy with the result."

"Shouldn't Lydia and Simon be here? You recruited them to help with the hunt."

"I can convey the necessary details."

"Oh good." Her voice was flat. "I won't have to participate at all."

"Stop being sullen." Bastien opened his ledger and poised his pencil for an answer. "Ideal age?"

Della sighed and set her mending in her lap. "I don't care." She gestured to him. "Your age."

"Height?"

"Taller than me."

"No maximum height? I'm over six feet. Is that too tall?"

"I mean, I don't want a giant. Your height is fine."

A knock interrupted their game. Bastien stood and opened the door.

Lydia beamed at him. "How did she like it?"

"Come on in and ask her yourself."

"I saw some kids headed up. I hope they didn't disturb you."

"Nah, we were already headed back by then."

Della stood. "I got your breeches dirty. I'll have to wash them before I give them back."

"Oh, nonsense." Lydia sat in Bastien's chair. "What is this?" She peered at the writing on the ledger.

"Bastien is making me dream big so that I can be disappointed." Della gave him a withering glance.

"Della is telling me what she wants in a husband," Bastien clarified.

"Oh, what a fun activity. Let's see." Lydia read. "My age." She flicked her eyes at Bastien. "I assume you wrote this?"

He nodded.

Lydia continued. "My height." She stopped reading and let her hands fall into her lap. "We just need your twin, Bastien."

He laughed, trying to cover his discomfort.

"Wait, don't you have brothers?" She clicked her tongue. "Simon and I were regretting our lack of single brothers, and there you were, hoarding yours."

"She wouldn't like my brothers. I hardly like them, and we're blood." The image of her with either of his brothers tried to crop into his mind, nearly choking him.

"You're a man. Women like men for different reasons. You likely

don't care if they are handsome. Della, on the other hand, might greatly appreciate it."

Lydia's eyes sparkled at Della, who returned the smile.

He couldn't suppress it any longer. The thought of Della on Luc's arm came over him, laughing at him, smiling only for him. He clenched his fists and grit his teeth. He gulped and took a steadying breath trying to control the jealousy that ripped through him. No, it would have to be a stranger. Della couldn't live in the same world as Angelica—or Bastien.

"We'll see," Bastien murmured, gathering Lydia's bathing suit from where it hung next to their jackets. He passed it to Lydia.

"I guess I'll get back. Keep playing this game, you two. You've already found yourself two possibilities." Lydia's eyes danced as they met Della's then Bastien's. With a wink, she ducked out the door.

Bastien, on the other hand, felt nauseated. He plucked his ledger from the table and snapped it closed, placing it back on the bookshelf. "I'm going to chop some wood. As you said, we've been living off charity." He threw his jacket on and closed the door behind him.

Images of Della in the arms of Luc or Willem made him feel sick. Worse, he thought either one of them would marry her without any need for convincing. One glance, and they'd take her for themselves.

He drew a deep breath of the frosty air, but it did nothing to clear his mind. If they moved to Montana together and dropped the ruse of marriage, she'd be snatched by any number of single men. Della didn't need Bastien's help to find herself a husband. She only needed time to select the right one. His heart lurched. The desire to lock her away was trying to claw its way out of him. He could give her whatever she wanted, except a husband.

As he lifted the ax from the chopping block, he was stunned to note the similarity between himself and his father. When Bastien had become a man and started frequenting the same clubs as his father, he learned his father had a mistress. The woman was not a prostitute, but a kind of second wife, though there was, of course, no marriage. She lived in a modest home, provided by Graham funds, and his father visited her at his leisure. Bastien had been sickened by this revelation, though his father had only patted his hand and assured him that he would understand someday.

Bastien smacked the log, splitting it into two halves that flew more than three feet from the block. For over an hour, he unleashed his frustration on the firewood. He tried to keep his mind trained on Angelica, but instead he thought of how happy Della was as a miner's wife. Not only that, but Angelica didn't belong in this world. She belonged to the city with its luxuries and socialites. Yet, he knew he wouldn't be happy in the city. For the first time, he wondered if Della

would be happier in her own future marriage than he.

For so long, he'd been focused on making himself the man worthy of marrying Angelica that it never occurred to him she might not be what he wanted. Not anymore.

With that, he stopped chopping and fetched the wheelbarrow. After he'd loaded the wood, he walked it to his cabin and stacked the logs against the outer walls. He'd chopped much more than they needed. Returning to the grassy area, he collected the remaining lumber and turned the wheelbarrow for Simon's house.

When he began stacking, Simon joined him. "Lydia says you might consider your brothers to marry Della."

Bastien didn't answer, not trusting himself not to growl. Simon's words sliced open the fresh wound on his heart. He should have taken this wood elsewhere.

"You really going to do that?"

Their eyes met, and Bastien knew that, though Simon was the silent type, he didn't miss much.

"No." Bastien's voice was firm.

"You goin' to find her someone else?"

Bastien didn't reply.

"Write to Angelica. The sooner you clear your mind, the better."

"There's no post."

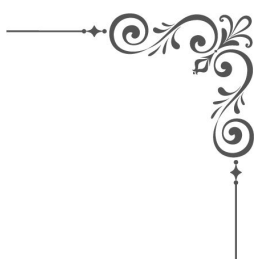
"You're recovered." Simon looked pointedly at Bastien's shoulder. "You could make it down this mountain if you wanted."

Bastien thought of the route. It would be treacherous, but with his experience, he was confident he could arrive in Meeteetse safely.

The wood was done, and Simon brushed the bark from his hands. "I'm much obliged."

With a nod to Simon, Bastien left his friend's cabin. As he pushed the wheelbarrow back to the chopping green he imagined a trip to Meeteetse and all it could bring. He could be free of any commitment to Angelica. He could beg Della to accept *him* for a husband. Surely his qualifications would meet her heartbreakingly low expectations of a husband.

When he reached the chopping green he turned the wheelbarrow over so the snow wouldn't collect inside. The flakes that had started this morning were growing in size and were now almost the size of an aspen leaf. The beginning of a storm was no time to consider the trek to Meeteetse.



Della



THE SUN HAD DIPPED below the horizon on Christmas Eve when Bastien came through the door holding a crate. "Sit down." He jerked his head towards the table.

Intrigued, she kept her eyes on him and did as he requested. When he set the box on the table in front of her, she raised her eyes in question. He lifted the lid to reveal a kaleidoscope of colored fabrics folded neatly inside.

"For me?"

Bastien nodded.

She pressed her fingertips to the hollow of her neck. "Thank you." She beamed, imagining all the possibilities the box held. She walked her fingers through the folds, hoping to find a blue she could use to make a shirt for Bastien.

She stopped and lifted her eyes to him again. "I love it."

"Lydia said you were handy with a needle. I thought you might like to make a few things for the house. I noticed Lydia has some stuff on her windows."

Della laughed. "Curtains?"

"Well, they're a different sort, but yes. I guess they are curtains."

Della stood and wrapped her arms around his waist. He waited only a moment before he returned the embrace.

She lifted her chin, not letting him go as her gaze moved past his jawline to his icy blue eyes. "What color would you like for the windows?"

"Whatever." He smiled at her upturned face. His eyes were intense, and the heat from his gaze slid its way along her insides, warming them as it went. Della blinked, breaking the moment.

"I got something for you too." She untangled herself from his embrace and opened the top drawer of their dresser to pull out a gift. "I wanted to get some sort of wrapping, but the weather ..."

He sat at the table, and she set his gift in front of him. It was wrapped in a linen towel tied on the top. He untied the knot. The cloth fell, revealing a pair of socks, a set of knit hat and gloves, and a book of medicinal herbs.

"Lydia was teaching me how to knit. The hat I made on my own,

but I'm afraid Lydia had to do most of the gloves." Once she'd made the hat, Della wanted to make matching gloves. She figured it would be like five tiny hats, one for each finger, only she was wrong. They'd been nearly impossible.

Bastien pulled the cap onto his head, giving Della a brief smile before working his fingers into the gloves. He flipped his hands this way and that to show they fit.

"We used Simon to get the right size." Della tapped the book. "I thought if you wanted to collect flowers and such, it might be nice to learn their uses. Most of these aren't flowers, though." She drew her hand away so he could lift the cover. "I hope you don't mind that it's used. Maribel gave it to me. She said Doc needed a new one anyway."

He turned the pages, roving over each new plant and its uses. He closed it and stared for a moment. Della held her breath. Why didn't he speak? He was surely used to lavish presents. Did he hate the gifts, then? She started to walk away, to hide her confusion and pain, but Bastien caught her hand and tugged her back. He wasn't looking at her, though. He still hadn't taken his eyes from the book. She stood nearby, letting him wrestle with whatever burdened him. When his face contorted with pain, she moved closer.

His gaze shifted to their hands, and he interlaced his fingers with hers. Standing, he pulled her flush against him and wrapped his free hand around the back of her neck, pushing her face into his chest. He spoke into her hair. "I can't let you go. I don't want you to marry anybody else. I can't bear the thought." His lips pressed kisses into her hair.

His words lifted her heart, her burden of what the future might bring. She didn't want to marry anyone else either. She'd heard of women, kept by rich and powerful men while those same men married the Angelica's of the world. It didn't matter that she wasn't worthy of all of him. She would take whatever he would give her for however long he could give it.

He cradled her face between his hands, his fingers strong and tender. "Will you stay with me?" He brushed a piece of her hair back, taking his eyes from hers for just a moment before turning his gaze to her again.

Della found it impossible to find her voice. It was silly for him to even ask. Never before had she been so happy. She would stay and continue this ruse for however long he would let her. She nodded, her eyes filling with tears.

Bastien smiled and bent to brush his lips against hers. The touch was soft, and his hands moved from her face to cup the back of her head. As the kiss deepened, she opened her mouth to him. Her whole body responded to his touch. His hand slid along her spine and pulled

her tighter at the bend in her back.

He pulled away and drew a shuddering breath. "You'll stay?" His eyes danced as he waited.

"I'll stay."

He caught her lips again. Like a brisk Wyoming wind, passion rushed over her, awakening her senses. She craved him, like a woman starved. She weaved her fingers into the hair at the back of his head and drew his mouth closer.

He growled, low and throaty but pulled away.

Della searched his face, trying to understand his hesitance.

"I can't." He retreated, reaching up to scrub his face, the day's whiskers scratching his hand. "We can't."

Della touched where those bristles had just moved against her lips, leaving them tingling. A sense of ownership overcame her. "We can't?" Della stepped closer, surveying his face as she tried to understand him.

"You don't have anybody." His hand waved between the two of them. "I feel a sense of responsibility for you."

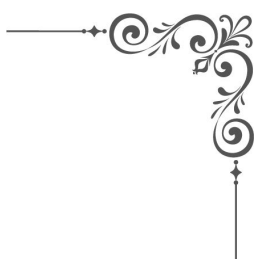
Della was cold without his arms around her. A spark of anger rose at his resistance. She wanted him for more than a moment. If he would just open himself to her, they could truly be together until he left for Montana. Maybe even after. She loved him, of that she was sure. She loved him the minute he agreed to this fake marriage. His sense of duty drove him to do good. Only now it was driving him away.

His shoulders hunched forward. "Normally, a girl has a father to keep men like me away until marriage. I'm not going to take your virginity while you are living in my care." His words were final, like the slamming of a gate.

Della closed her eyes. He thought she was a virgin. Her mind tried to find a pathway to tell him she wasn't, but any way she could, would only raise questions. Questions she wasn't ready to answer. Questions that would land her alone at best and with her head in a noose at the worst.

"I don't want you to stay away." She lifted a hand to him. "My father never cared for me. If he were here, he'd let you have me for whatever money was in your pocket." The truth of those words was like a hammer to her chest, the pain of his deal with Walker greater than ever. Being with Bastien gave Della a taste of what protection really meant. When the bar was higher, the dirt where she'd come from felt lower.

He took two backward steps. "I've got to get some air." He turned to the coat rack and pulled his jacket from the hook. He was out the door before he'd even put it on.



Bastien



BASTIEN WALKED INTO the night, the snow crunching under his boots. The air was thick with snowflakes, and he eyed the mountain peak, a silhouette against the dark sky. If this snow didn't stop, they would be at risk for an avalanche.

The cool air served to clear his head, which was full of the scent of her hair and the taste of her tongue. He walked along the street, empty at this hour, most everyone asleep or enjoying their Christmas Eve inside. He'd have to go down the mountain, as Simon said. Except, telling Angelica was only half the solution. Regardless of his predicament, he couldn't wipe away the smile that split his cheeks.

He passed house after house, finally reaching the trees. He could beg and throw money at a preacher. How much would it cost for a man of God to risk his life on the treacherous trip up here in the dead of winter? Except they'd need to do it privately, or the town would discover their ruse. Della would be an outcast, and he could lose his position. He shook his head.

A copse of pines stood ahead, the same trees he'd marked that day as the point in which Della could decide she no longer trusted him. The thought of her drove the stress from his mind, and a small smile lifted his heart. She was brave and trusted him inexplicably. Only because he hadn't told her about his past. She knew nothing of the man he used to be. How could he carry on with Della without revealing all?

He closed his eyes at his younger self. He had been a fool then. Was a fool now for continuing his plans with Angelica. She had been a good match for him when he was younger, but these years out West had changed him. He needed someone with grit, someone like Della. What was the point of setting himself up with the mine in Montana if Angelica would never be happy there? He'd been a fool, hanging his hat on an old dream and not seeing the hat no longer fit.

His ill-fitting plans were obvious now, and he needed a new one. There was no question of who he wanted, only how to make her his. There was no chance he would take Della into Meeteetse to find a preacher. With winter weather, the trip was difficult even for the most experienced rider. She would suffer much. He could never ask that of

her just to satisfy his desires. No, the only way was to wait until a hard thaw. The end of January, if they were lucky, more likely the end of February.

His decision made, he turned for the cabin. It's draw felt physical, as though Della held an invisible lasso and pulled him back hand over hand. He barely registered passing through the town and entering the cabin.

The lantern stood on the stove, burning low and shedding enough light for him to remove his boots and jacket. Della's still form lay under the quilts. He undressed to his undergarments and slid in beside her. Bastien longed to hold her again, but instead, he put a crease in the blankets, so there was a barrier between them.

The sun rose, spilling light into his small cabin. Though his family was far away and Kirwin held none of the events and merriment that usually accompanied a Graham Family Christmas, this year had already become his favorite. Despite his attempts at distance, he'd woken curled around Della's small body. The air was cold, and he dreaded sliding out from Della's warmth to light the stove.

He heard Della's breathing change from the deep rhythm of sleep to the shorter ones of wakefulness. When she stilled, he knew her brain had registered their position. He waited for her to throw him off or at least scoot away from him, but she did neither. She gave a contented sigh, and he couldn't feign sleep any longer. He pulled her tighter to him and murmured into her hair, "Good morning."

Her satisfied groan was enough to drive him down the mountain and haul a man of God up into these hills. She faced him, moving away before his body got the better of him. "I don't ever want to get out." She burrowed deeper into the blankets, so only her eyes poked out.

Bastien laughed and left the bed to begin the task of heating the cabin.

She rolled into the place where he had been. "Your spot is warmer."

It required every ounce of his willpower to keep from climbing back in and showing her just how warm he could make her. "You rest. I'll make you breakfast for a change."

Her head popped up from the pillow he'd just vacated. "Not a chance. It's Christmas." She rolled over, stretching and arching her back. His desire was such that Bastien had to turn away, though the image of her and thoughts of what he wanted to do were seared into his mind like the brand on his grandfather's cattle.

"I have something in the icebox," she said, lifting the covers. Her stockinged feet whispered along the floorboards as she rushed across the room.

She stood behind him as he blew the small flame that had started in the stove. When the flame was high enough, he piled kindling on top. He sat back on his heels and faced her. Living with her for another three months would be near impossible. Expressing his feelings had been a mistake. He should have never opened that door. But then she smiled, and his insides melted like butter on one of her biscuits.

They readied for the Christmas dance, and though her dress was the same one she'd worn to the Hallow's Eve dance, the sparkle in her eyes was greater.

He pulled her into his arms. "You are beautiful."

"I'm the same as always. Like the wildflowers on this mountain, you just weren't looking."

"I was looking." To his shame, he'd appreciated her appearance since the day she stepped out from behind that barrel. Though her hair had been dusty and her eyes guarded, he'd been dumbfounded that a woman with her beauty could have been ordered by a man with as meager means as James.

When Della had come out from behind the assay office, she looked better suited as a wealthy man's mistress than the desperate spinster he'd conjured in his mind when he heard of a mail-order bride.

"I've been thinking and I'd like to tell you something that has weighed on me."

Della lifted her eyes to him, her chin ducked tentatively as she awaited his confession.

"The man I am, here, with you. I wasn't always like this. My family in Chicago is quite wealthy. With that wealth came a certain power." He ran a hand through his hair. Even now he could remember the pride of privilege. How the women in the Chicago club fawned over him as he gambled and drank. "I told you I never used the brothels in Meeteetse, but I used women in Chicago, as though they were merely an item to be ordered off the menu."

Della stepped backward, reaching behind her to find the bed before leaning against it. Her face told him this story did him no credit. But he would not be dissuaded. If she had the courage to be truthful with Simon and Lydia, he could at least match that bravery by giving her his own history.

"I had a favorite girl." Bastien stopped, willing himself to continue through the foul taste on his tongue. "When she was unavailable I asked another girl her whereabouts." Bastien omitted the fact that he'd been in the other girl's bed. The pinched look on Della's face told him she already wished he would stop his tale. "I learned she was dead. Had died in an attempt to rid herself of a pregnancy."

At his words he was transported back to that room in the club and

the disheveled sheets. The working girl had placed her hand on his chest. "Oh, honey. I'm sure it wasn't yours. She was busier than most of us." Bile had risen in his throat and he fled the club.

He met Della's eyes in the present. "I never returned to the establishment. Soon after, I left Chicago. I no longer trusted myself with the power bestowed upon a Graham in that city."

Della crossed her arms. "Was the baby yours?"

Bastien sucked in a breath. "I don't know." It would be easy to pretend it wasn't, to accept that girl's deducement of the facts. The truth was he would never know.

Della came to him and reached a hand to brush his cheek. "I'm sorry that happened to her. And to you."

Bastien snorted. "I don't deserve any pity from you or anyone. I did all the damage with none of the sacrifice."

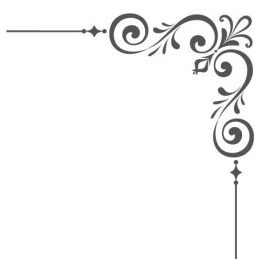
"You're alive, yes. But from the pain on your face I see you were not unscathed. Leaving your life wasn't a sacrifice? I've heard you speak of your family. Leaving them could not have been easy for you. Working that mine every day is not easy."

"But those were all *my* choices. She didn't have a choice."

Della's face darkened as he knew it would. Her choices had been taken from her and now she saw him as the type of man who would do that to another. She turned her thoughtful expression on him. "We always have a choice. Yes, sometimes our options are limited to bad or worse, but there is never just one."

She came to him then and tugged his arms from where they hugged his waist and placed them around her instead.

Holding Della now, his resolve firmed. He wouldn't disrespect her in the way he'd done so many others. When spring came, he would take her down the mountain and marry her. Maybe in Cody, or maybe they'd have a big wedding in Montana or even Chicago. She was everything he never thought he deserved.



Della



DELLA HELD BASTIEN'S arm as they made their way to the largest building in the town, which served as the dance hall. He carried Della's contribution to the Christmas feast, the same pecan pie she'd made for their dinner with the Skinners over a month ago. Though she hadn't yet taken any steps toward selling them, her baked goods were beginning to gain a reputation in their small community.

The children performed a nativity play, and all the adults stood around the walls to watch. Little Milo was a sheep, and he bleated throughout all the dialogue, causing the older children to glare and the parents to chuckle.

Once the fiddle started, couples moved to the dance floor. Della pulled his arm tighter and lifted her chin at Bastien. "Will you dance with me, husband?"

He didn't answer, only pulled her onto the floor with a twirl. She was better than the first dance but still relied heavily on Bastien's strong arms to hold her up and guide her through the moves.

They stuck close to Lydia and Simon, who had pawned their children off on the older ones and were rarely and blessedly alone. Bastien offered his arm to Lydia, and Simon and Della stood on the sides admiring their fluid movements.

"She loves to dance, but I'm not nearly the partner Bastien is. He grew up in dance halls, while I grew up with dirt floors."

"Bastien said you're likely to take over as foreman when he leaves."

Simon nodded.

"You've come a long way from dirt floors."

Della only wished a woman could work her way to success in that way. A working woman was usually scorned instead of respected. The only way she could rise above her station was by marriage.

She tried not to think of Bastien's adamant discouragement of her marrying his brother. His infatuation with her had likely played a role in his disgust at the idea. Still, Della knew the thought of her marrying anyone in a family as wealthy as the Grahams was preposterous. Bastien might desire her, but he could never marry her. A family like his had marriages planned out years in advance. Angelica was likely

chosen for him years ago. The two had probably grown up together, knowing they would one day wed.

With a sigh, Della stepped away to get herself a drink.

A group of ladies was admiring Lydia and Bastien's dancing.

"Can you believe he married that woman? She's probably come from some brothel back east. If I'd known he was that desperate, I'd have gotten my sister here a year ago."

Another woman chimed in. "Not any girl would do. Her origins or family may be a mystery, but she is a beauty."

Margie leaned forward, and Della had to strain to catch her words. "Out here, family doesn't matter. I've seen men marry whores with less beauty. Some men just want someone soft to own for themselves."

Della stumbled on the lifted edge of the plank flooring and spilled her drink. The movement must have caught his eye because Bastien passed Lydia to Simon and came to Della, concern blazing in his eyes.

"Are you all right?" He lifted the now nearly empty drink from her hand and set it aside.

"They hate me," Della whispered.

Bastien leaned in, taking both her hands. "What? Who?" He whipped around, as though expecting to find the culprit.

"I don't belong here. I don't belong with you." This was exactly how she should expect other women to treat a mistress, only they didn't even know. She tried to pull away, but Bastien held her close. The song ended, and Lydia and Simon came their way.

The musicians changed from the fast-paced romp that Lydia and Bastien had just danced to a slower, softer tune. Bastien pulled her onto the floor, and they held each other close. Della tried to relax in his arms and let the music chase away the doubt that weighted her feet.

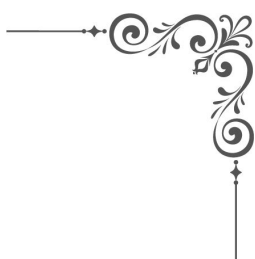
"Please, talk to me."

Della shook her head, knowing anything he said would only lead to empty promises, or worse, confirmation of her fears. She'd rather continue playing his wife, keep living this dream life for as long as he would allow. With a shake, she tried to drive away the ladies' words and lifted her mouth into a smile. "I won't let their words bother me. I have you. That's all I need."

He didn't press, but his contemplative expression told Della this conversation wasn't over. He flashed her a smile and turned her in an elaborate spin, then pulled her in again, so her back was to his front, their arms crossed in front of her. Just when she thought others might think it inappropriate, he spun her again, and they resumed the normal position of two dancers. Della tried to ignore the sensation of eyes on her. If the women were watching Lydia, they surely watched Della now. Could they see where she'd come from? Were her bruises

visible in her demeanor even after they'd left her skin?

That night, though Della craved his touch, Bastien insisted on sleeping on the floor once again. Whatever reasons he had, he kept to himself hidden behind a stern face that brooked no argument. Though he'd kissed her the day before and held her on the dance floor, he now felt as far away as the day he dumped her belongings inside the cabin.



Della



NEW YEAR'S DAY DAWNED bright without signs of snow. The miners had the day off, and Simon and Bastien set off, rifles in hand, to do a bit of small game hunting. Bastien promised he would bring her a snow rabbit pelt and make it into a muff for her hands. Alone, Della cleaned the cabin, sweeping out the cobwebs from underneath the bed.

The door shook with the force of a heavy knock.

She scowled. Who could that be? She opened the door to see the timid face of Billy Granger, a young boy who was not yet old enough to go down in the mine. Hopefully they waited until the boys at least had whiskers before sending them down into a dark hole that could make even the bravest of men tremble.

"I been cleaning out the Tewksbury's storage room and found this for Mr. Graham. Must've fallen from the mailbag some time ago. Boss said to bring it down here directly."

Della accepted the envelope and noted a swirling scrawl. "Thank you, Billy." She said farewell and closed the door. The writing was feminine. It could be from his mother or Ivete, but Della knew it was Angelica. There wasn't any clue that it was a love letter, but the paper burned her hand with her certainty.

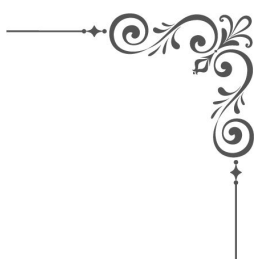
She set the letter on the table and continued with her work. She scrubbed harder than ever as though the letter were staring at her, and she had to prove her worthiness to occupy this cabin. She tried to picture Angelica, at a fancy desk, scrawling this letter to her beloved. The woman must be beautiful and self-assured to send a man like Bastien into the world and be confident he would return faithful.

"Angelica." Della spoke the forbidden name into the empty cabin. She held her head high, like a woman of propriety surely would. She even looked down her nose at an imaginary Della.

Her shoulders slumped and her chin dropped to her chest. She wasn't a high-born lady. She wasn't even innocent or truthful or any other thing a man like Bastien deserved. Angelica had nothing to fear. Della was but a blip in Bastien's world. A good deed that allowed him to live at peace with himself.

Like over-mixing a batter, knowing it would make the pastry

tough, Della was unable to tear her focus from the letter in her hand. She ached to know what it contained. The words she wrote with her beautiful hand. And what did Bastien write back to his beloved? Did he make her laugh the way he did Della? Did he use words to paint a picture of their future together? Della's bottom lip quivered and she stuffed the letter into the dresser underneath a pile of freshly laundered clothes. She slammed the drawer closed and stared at the pitiful barrier. If he went in search of anything, he would find the folded mass of paper. She turned away. Her intention wasn't to keep it from him forever, but she wasn't sure when she would give it to him either.



Bastien



AFTER NEARLY A WEEK of clear skies, the snow fell lightly on Bastien and Simon's shoulders. They walked the crunching snow, their pockets full of shells.

Simon led them to a spot where he'd scouted a rabbit earlier in the week. "Lydia told me what those women said at the dance."

"Did she? Della still hasn't told me." Bastien gave a small shake of his head.

"It's not surprising. Your world hates seeing you with her, and her world is mad that she's the lucky one."

"Della only shows me frustration or anger. Any other emotion she might feel she keeps shut tight as though I'm not to be trusted."

Simon nodded as though this was normal.

Bastien went on, all his frustrations pouring out like an avalanche. "She's not like Angelica, who was not complicated. I understood her. She was less ... difficult."

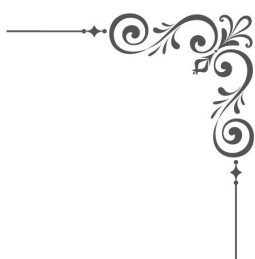
Simon chortled. "Every woman is difficult. Your Angelica hid it where you couldn't see."

"Maybe." Instead of telling Simon how wrong he was, Bastien tried to be polite. Maybe Angelica was just raised to have more control over her emotions. The instant he thought it, guilt overcame him. Of course Angelica seemed all sweetness and light. That's what her life had been like, with none of the darkness and jagged edges Della had experienced on a daily basis. Life had taught Della not to show joy. No. Life had taught Della there was no joy to experience, only frustration, anger, and fear.

Simon's gaze continued sweeping the forest floor, but his voice rose with unmistakable surety. "There are always surprises when you marry. Everyone holds back, whether it is due to hopeful thinking or calculated deception. Either way, she's yours, and you have to love it as you love her."

He considered how easy it had been to fancy himself in love with Angelica. She was like a shiny diamond, cut perfectly and displayed in a storefront window with natural light catching its manufactured shape. Della was a pearl, created through all she'd endured, yet more beautiful because of her trials. Not just her appearance, but her

strength and spunk. She should be hardened, yet she was soft, pliable, like someone who didn't have everything sorted. A partner he could grow and change with over the years.



Bastien



THE MEN RETURNED TO town with three rabbits in hand, all Snowshoe. Having already skinned and washed the fur in the river, they stopped at Simon's house on the edge of town to create the pickling solution that was part of the tanning process.

When Bastien returned to his cabin with a rabbit in hand, the air inside hung muggy from the mixture of wet clothes and high heat. He beamed at Della. "You're getting your muff. With that and your coat, you're going to look like a real mountaineer soon."

Della smiled at him over her shoulder then finished hanging a load of laundry. Bastien set the rabbit on the stove and rooted his feet to the floor, resisting the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her full lips.

She brushed hair away from her face and pressed the loose tendrils into her coif. "I supposed I already do."

He removed his boots and coat. "Simon told me what the ladies said at the dance." Maybe if she thought he already knew, she would talk about it.

"Did Lydia say anything else?" Her voice held an edge that Bastien couldn't decipher.

"I wish you wouldn't keep things from me." He kept his distance, surveying her reaction.

Her voice rang bitter between them. "There are things better left untold."

"But how will I ever know all of you?" If what Simon said was right, he was bound for some surprises, but it was too intentional with her, as though she doubted his commitment. It wasn't until the truth was out that someone could prove they would love her despite her faults. He needed her to open up to him, so he could prove himself as Lydia had.

He stepped closer, hoping she'd look at him, but she kept her eyes on the floor. "You didn't think Lydia would like you when she knew the truth. She did."

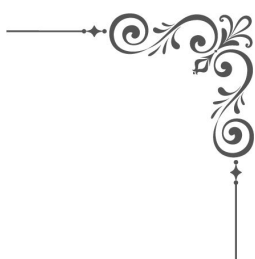
"This is different. You won't see me the same."

"Lydia doesn't see you the same. What she sees now is the true you. Isn't that better?"

This was no longer about the gossiping women. The air in the cabin changed and carried the weight of one of the mine's deeper tunnels as he waited for her response.

Della straightened her shoulders, and as quickly as the vulnerability had appeared, it vanished. "I've only made a rabbit one other time. I'll run down to the store and see what herbs Sarah has." She had her boots on already and pulled her jacket on before he could respond.

When the door closed behind her, he heaved a sigh and closed his eyes. No, there was no way Angelica had ever been this difficult. With her, he'd had Ivete to help. With Della, he was groping in the night, with no moon to light the way.



Della



AS JANUARY CAME TO a close, Kirwin had yet to experience a decent thaw. Della lived with the comfort that nobody would be carrying any news or mail. She and Bastien lived as though they, too, believed the ruse they showed to everyone. She knew she was falling in love with him, but couldn't muster the courage to sort out the business of becoming his mistress. He'd asked her to stay, to not marry another, yet he refused to touch her.

She'd been so adamant about getting herself a husband. She had hardly considered other options. Being a mistress was almost preferable to wifehood. Once Bastien was set up in Montana, he would shortly have enough funds to provide her a modest home. Something like this cabin would be more than enough. She'd get to run her household how she wished with no interference, though Bastien hardly interfered now. The best part ... she would get Bastien in her bed. Not as often as she wished, but the thought of sharing her bed with anyone else made her stomach twist in protest.

Della was at the general store buying ingredients for dinner when the bell chimed, announcing someone's entrance. A voice rang out, the pitch more demanding than a woman's but not quite as low as a man's voice. Della lifted her concentration from the spool of thread she was considering and glanced to the entrance.

Bronco Nell stood not three feet from her. Della's eyes bulged, and her gaze darted around the room, desperate for a place to hide so she might not have to explain her presence in Kirwin.

Bronco showed just a sliver of shock before her face morphed into a satisfied smile. "You're still here."

"Yes." Della raised her chin, hoping an outward show of confidence would help her insides feel less clammy. "I'm Mrs. Graham now."

Bronco raised her eyebrows. "Good for you. I think you should take me back to your house, Mrs. Graham. I could use a hot cup of coffee."

Della may respect Bronco's independence, but the woman had shown no affection in return. Della would just as soon bring a cougar inside for coffee, yet refusal was impossible while Mr. Tewksbury

stood within earshot.

“Of course. I’m very grateful to you for bringing me to Kirwin that first day.”

The two women left the store, Della’s items forgotten on the counter, and walked the short distance to Bastien’s cabin.

As soon as the door closed, Bronco spoke. “I don’t need any coffee.” Her eyes moved around the room as though checking for any other persons. “There’s news in Meeteetse of a woman named Daisy Sturgis. Killed her husband in cold blood. The drawing looks a fair bit like you.”

Bronco’s gaze sat hard on Della. “Should I call you Daisy or Della?”

The blood rushed from Della’s head and she felt weak. She reached out to steady herself against the stove, but it was further away than she thought. She stumbled and caught herself before she fell to the ground.

Bronco lurched forward, hauled her aright, and helped steady her on her feet. Her eyes shone softer than they had before as she walked Della to her table and pushed her gently into a chair. “Does your husband know?”

“He’s not my husband. We just told them that so I could stay here for the winter.” Della’s voice trembled as she met Bronco’s stern eyes. “How did you even make it up here?”

“I didn’t get the nickname ‘Bronco’ for nothin’.” The mischief on her face eased Della’s ache. “Now, listen. More than most, I know we women need to stick together. I’m not looking to out you to your husband or this town. But you have no business heading back to Meeteetse. If anyone from town comes here, you best hide your face. Better if you and your man up and leave this place before some bounty hunter finds you first. Martin Greiner has been seen in Thermopolis. I’m sure he’d be more than happy to bring in a lady like yourself, no matter the bounty. I’d hate to think what he’d do to you first, though.”

Della suppressed a shiver at the memory of that man hauling his catch into a wagon and Bronco’s implications. There was no way to rush Bastien out of Kirwin any sooner than he had planned, not without telling him why. “Has anyone in Meeteetse identified me?”

“The hotel manager mentioned you passed through and left in the dead of night. We’d no clue you’d found your way back up here.” She pursed her lips as she considered, then nodded and continued. “He’d recognize you if you came ‘round again.”

Della nodded. She had no wish to go to town and staying out of sight of visitors should be easy enough. But once travel to and from Kirwin increased, folks in this community would see her picture for themselves. “You won’t say anything?”

“Way I see it, most men get what’s coming to ’em. I’ll do you one better. See if I can’t get that poster out of the post office before any folk from up here have a chance to lay eyes on your likeness.”

Della ached to embrace the woman. She wrapped her arms tight about her waist to keep from doing so. Instead, Della gave her all she owned, the truth. “My husband beat me, was going to kill me.” She let out a sigh the same release she’d felt at telling Lydia the news. “I fought him off, and he hit his head. I didn’t mean ...” She swallowed the sickness that accompanied the memory. “It was an accident.”

“They didn’t arrest you on sight?”

“I was bruised, broken, and bloody, but not stupid. I left him there and ran.” *And ran. And ran.* “My aunt showed me James’s ad in the paper, and I knew it was my saving grace.”

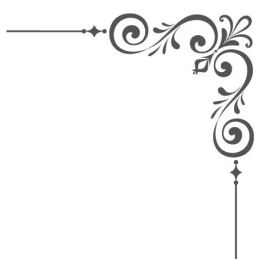
Bronco nodded, her face contemplative. Did she believe the story or think Della a liar?

“Nobody will learn your story from me.” Bronco straightened in her chair. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve been hunting, and there’s nothin’ I’d like more than a hot slice of pie from the cafe.” She stood and placed her hands on her lower back, bending backward with a faint crack of joints. “Best of luck to you.” She dipped her head and walked to the door.

“Bronco?” Della called after her. “Thank you.”

This woman’s kindness was inexplicable. Della still hadn’t drawn a full breath when Bronco gave a whisper of a smile and left, closing the door and leaving Della to the quiet stillness of the cabin.

She had to tell him. Once the road was clear, he would surely have reason to go to Meeteetse. If not him, then others in the town. She couldn’t figure a way to convince him to leave before the spring. His pragmatism would need to know why and she wasn’t ready to tell him, to see the hurt in his face when he learned that her deceit went beyond the lie they’d concocted together. She glanced around the space that had been her home for the happiest months of her life. Her gaze fell on a bowl of dough. Over risen in the heat of the cabin and the extra time she’d spent with Bronco. She strode to the bowl and removed the towel. Pressing her hand into the dough she punched out all the extra air and watched as the yeasty mass crumpled into a small glob.



Bastien



THEY JUST FINISHED a late Saturday breakfast when Bastien said, “I heard Bronco was in town yesterday. That woman can do things most men can’t.” He shook his head in admiration. “I thought to head into Meeteetse. I have some business there.” Like a letter to send to Angelica and a conversation with a preacher.

“No.” Della’s voice was unreasonably fierce, and she moved a step towards him. With tight fingers she wrung the towel she used to dry her hands.

Bastien stopped lacing his boots and looked up at her. “Why?”

Della’s throat bobbed and her eyes were as wide as an owl’s. “I just ... isn’t it dangerous?”

Bastien dipped his head in acknowledgment and stretched his boot laces tighter. “It can be, but I won’t take any risks. If Bronco can make it up, I’m fairly certain I can make it down.” He lifted his eyes to her again and saw her lower lip tremble. “I promise if there is any risk, I’ll come back to you right away.” Part of him missed her already.

She closed her eyes and her chest fell with an audible exhale. The urge to take her into his arms, to both comfort her and himself, washed through him with a shock better than any whiskey in Meeteetse. He’d wanted to propose ever since their first kiss, but a promise made by someone who was already committed was hypocrisy. Though he had never proposed to Angelica, their families had talked of their union since he was a child. He needed to clear up any expectation she had, whether voiced or otherwise. But Della’s resistance to him leaving was strong. Regardless of his intentions, his heart weighed heavy at the thought of leaving her terrified.

Her eyes were wide as dinner plates when she spoke. “You said you wouldn’t be going to Meeteetse until the end of February.”

She walked to him with tentative steps. He stood to meet her, taking her hands. She gripped his hands, her knuckles white like when she clung to the horse’s saddle horn.

Bastien laughed. “Della, darling. Be reasonable.” When she didn’t let go, he gave her hands a gentle squeeze. Her face drooped with misery, and he wanted to kiss it into joy. He led her to the bed and pressed her to sit. She didn’t lift her gaze, so he knelt on the floor, his

face low enough he could meet her downcast eyes.

"I have to go, to clear things with Angelica." He placed a hand on her knee. "Would you like me to send word to your father? Ask his permission?"

"Why word to my father?" Her face was guarded but showed she knew more than she let on. "Are you breaking things with Angelica?"

"Of course." Bastien tried to think back, hadn't he already said as much?

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You want to marry *me*?"

He laughed outright. "Haven't I been clear on that?"

"No. I thought ..." Her voice trailed. "I thought I would be your mistress."

Shock rocked Bastien's body. He cupped her face with his hands. How could she have wanted such a thing for herself? How could she have thought that's what he wanted from her? "Never. I want you in my home, not just my bed. I want that partnership you spoke of. I want to make mistakes together and try again. Together."

"But, Angelica."

"That's why I need to go to town. I need to write to her and tell her my plans have changed. You've changed everything, Della."

"You are very good," she whispered, her voice thick. Tears welled in her eyes and threatened to fall. "But you cannot do this. I won't agree to it." Her voice cracked as her words shot a bullet through his heart.

He stood, stricken. "You'd be my mistress, but you will not marry me?" What woman would choose a life of shame over one of love?

"I would love to marry you—"

Bastien reached out to her, but she leaned away from him.

"But you must know something first." She met his gaze, and resolve shone in her eyes.

"Sit," she said, gesturing to his armchair. It was across the room, and he chose instead to pull one of the table chairs to the bedside and sit where their knees were almost touching. She folded her hands in her lap. "I was married before." She forced the words out, as though they were bad air. "He is dead now."

Bastien let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He was a miner. Widows were not uncommon in his world. His mother might care, but nobody could have any real objections to a woman having been married before. Only her dishonesty crawled along his spine like a stalking spider. He'd longed for her truth for so long, but now she gave it to him, he feared it.

"He was evil." The blackness of her voice startled him. He thought of her broken tooth, of the things she'd said about her father.

"Was he the one who hurt you?"

Della nodded, but she wasn't finished. "My father was bad, but Walker was worse."

Bastien moved to stand, and Della put out a hand. "Please, let me tell you everything. I don't know when I'll have the courage again."

He sat and leaned against the back of the chair once again, waiting.

"Shortly after we married, there was an accident at a factory. A man died, the husband of one of Walker's old lovers. He left our bed for hers." Her voice cracked, and she let her head fall back, her eyes on the ceiling as though trying to control herself. "Though I never objected to his choice, over time, he resented me for standing in the way of their union." Her eyes rested on far-away memory, and the old sadness he'd thought long gone settled once again like a thick morning fog. "His resentment turned to hatred. Soon, I think he began taking pleasure in hurting me. The abuse grew worse until I knew he would kill me. I tried once to go back to my father, but Walker dragged me to his home again. Said I was his property."

Blood pounded in Bastien's ears. He wanted to find this man, and kill him. "He is not a real man and—"

Della lifted her hand to cut him off. "One night, he came after me. I tried to defend myself, but he only became crazy with rage. I tried to fight him off." Her eyes met his as though what she was about to say was vitally important. "I knew he would kill me. The only thing I could reach was a fire poker. I tried to hit him with it. I missed, but he tripped over a stool and hit his head on the fireplace. I'm wanted for his murder, and there are posters with my picture in Meeteetse. I hoped I'd made a name for myself outside of Daisy, but Bronco recognized me."

Bastien's stomach lurched like when he would wrestle with his brothers, and one of them landed a fist to his gut. He thought of the way he'd abused women, not in the way she'd described, but he'd used them without care for their health or happiness. He rose but couldn't bring his legs to take him to her. She wasn't the murderess the outside world might proclaim. He wrestled with himself, trying to figure what prevented him from speaking, from acting, from taking her in his arms and telling her none of it mattered. But it did matter. The tightness in his chest told him so. He had been a fool to be bewitched by her cunning, rather than aware that he too was being lied to.

"Is that everything? Have you given me the truth now?" The words were bitter as they passed through his lips.

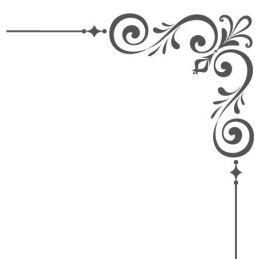
"There's one more thing." Della pushed off the bed and opened the dresser drawer. She dug underneath the clothes and came up with a letter. "It was found in Tewksbury's storage room. I don't know how

old.”

Could there really be more? He took the envelope and turned it to see Angelica’s scrawl. With a flash, his eyes met Della’s. “How long have you had this hidden?”

Though she didn’t reply, her face bespoke her shame.

“You may not be a murderer, but I’ll never get the whole truth with you,” he ground out before yanking open the door and stepping onto the porch. The frigid air hit him, but wasn’t enough to soothe his anger. He continued on to the stables with clenched hands. Three years later and he still believed what suited him, rather than the truth.



Della



DELLA LAY IN BASTIEN'S bed with the blankets over her head when a hard knock on the door woke her. Disoriented, she stumbled her way to the latch and lifted it, preparing for the bittersweet sight of Bastien's face.

"Can you tell me why my husband is interim foreman starting on Monday?"

Della's heart fell to her feet. She'd been a fool to hope it would be him. He wouldn't knock on his own door.

Lydia pushed past Della and into the cabin. She walked over to warm her hands by the stove, and noticing the fire was too low to help, she huffed and pulled a log from the woodbox. With a creak, she turned the handle and opened the door, placing the wood inside.

She brushed her hands and turned to Della, eyebrows raised.

"Bastien left." Della's stomach tied itself into a knot. He wasn't coming back, either. She didn't know how she knew it, but she did, with complete certainty. He couldn't come back unless he planned to continue living with her. And why would he want to do that any longer?

"Where?" Lydia turned as though she would see him on the street. "Meeteetse? Simon mentioned last week that Bastien wanted to head down to Meeteetse."

"I don't know." Della's voice was miserable and she was tired of thinking where he'd gone. Her eyes flashed to the rumpled covers. The spot was likely still warm and called to her.

"He mentioned trying to bring you down for a wedding. Obviously that's out of the question."

Della glanced out the window, where an overcast sky dropped acorn-sized snowflakes. "There won't be a wedding." And not because of the thick snow that fell. She'd been so close to happiness. He'd wanted to marry *her*, Della Hampton. The thought still threatened to take her breath and keep it. But now, thoughts of Bastien threatened to cut out her heart. Maybe one day she could recall this time with fondness for the brief reprieve it was.

Lydia placed a hand on Della's shoulder. "Does he know?"

Della nodded, a cry lodged in her throat. Hot tears cut a path down

her cheeks as she spoke the truth she'd known since he walked out the door. "I should have told him sooner, before he had the idea to head into town. Bronco said my poster had reached Meeteetse."

"It just doesn't seem fair. It's just bad luck that someone in Omaha has it out for you." She shook her head. "You'd think anyone like Walker would have a reputation for being mean."

"He did. You're used to an honest sheriff working to keep the people safe. In Omaha, we have the police. They're rotten. They only look after themselves and their friends. Everyone else is prey. And Walker was friends with several of them." Della spat, her age-old anger at being sold to him rising once again.

"So, what now?"

"I don't know." Della shrugged. "Bastien didn't take me down to turn me in. That's all I can think of now."

"I see why you were afraid to tell him. It could have gone either way, it was a risk." Lydia cocked her head, her mouth turned down in a frown.

"He wanted to marry me. I don't know a lot about Angelica, but I couldn't let him sever that tie without knowing just who he was severing it for. No doubt she's perfect for him. Why else would he have waited for her all these years?"

"*You're* perfect for him. Maybe she was perfect for him back then, but he's a different man now. I remember the first day he showed up in town, dressed like a dandy with thin arms and soft hands. He hardly knew what to do in the mine. Your James had to teach him like a mama bird teaches a baby bird to fly. But fly he did." She chuckled. "Eventually. Had to grow some muscle and toughen those palms first. But as his Chicago airs fell away, the darkness that seemed to follow him everywhere fell away, too. He laughed with us and began truly living with us instead of near us. He went from avoiding everyone to helping life be good for everyone." Lydia placed her hand on Della's arm. "He's not a fool. If he chose you, he meant to."

Della wished Lydia were right, but her friend hadn't seen the look on his face when he left.

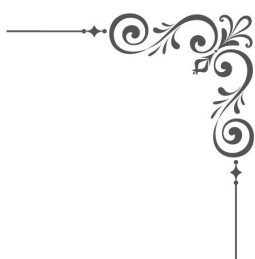
Lydia wrapped her arms around Della and hugged her tight. "Don't despair. He'll come back. You'll see." She left the cabin colder than before.

Della stood at the window, watching her only friend until she disappeared down the street. The snow had turned to rain, and tiny brown puddles were already forming.

A figure caught her eye. Shapely legs in breeches took their owner into the cafe. Della stared long after the cafe door closed behind her. Bronco Nell.

Della slipped into her jacket and pushed Bastien from her mind. He

may have been generous before, gifting her jackets and fabric, but she wasn't the girl he thought she was. She wasn't going to wait here in the hopes that he would bring a preacher back with him. The absurdity of that idea made her laugh, the hard sound hollow in the empty cabin. More likely, he would return with the marshal to bring her to Meeteetse in chains. She hadn't waited to be caught in Omaha, and she wasn't going to wait around here either.



Bastien



BASTIEN FINISHED SKINNING the rabbit and placed it on the spit. He set it over the fire and sat on the log that served as a seat. The hunting cabin deeper in the woods he'd been at since leaving his own cabin offered shelter and no comfort. He'd had to clear out a pack rat's nest before bedding down for his first night. No stove, bed, or chairs were included. The dancing flames mesmerized him, their waver interrupted by the occasional sizzle when a droplet of fat fell from the meat.

No matter what Simon said, Della was an enigma. She would never open up to him and give him everything. He saw the way she treated Lydia. The woman had been good to Della this whole time, yet she still hesitated to trust her friend with the truth.

She was like the mine, her truth came in pockets, and there was no way to follow a vein and uncover all of it. He had to wait for her to reveal it or else search haphazardly until he stumbled upon a spot rich with minerals.

Angelica's letter burned a hole in his breast pocket. He had yet to read it, his mind too much a jumble of thoughts to let in one more worry. But now ... since he had made no headway regarding Della, he decided a few words from Angelica couldn't make anything worse. She was an open pit mine. He'd seen everything in her life. There were no mysteries, no surprises. At least none so grand as murder.

He pulled the envelope out and slid his thumb across, breaking the seal. Her familiar handwriting served to ease his heart. As sure as he was that Chicago wasn't the place for him, part of his heart would always reside there with his family. Angelica brought him comfort, but not love. He wondered when his love for her had stopped. Was it when he met Della or before? Hard to know when he'd only just now realized. He still had a deep respect for her and an idea that marriage to her would be what he'd always expected. Safe. Predictable.

His fears, the reason he left Chicago, were no longer relevant. He was a different man.

He'd been different from the moment he learned of that club girl's death. He may have run away from the guilt, but he had already been forever changed.

With his mind clear for the first time in days, he focused his eyes on the words he held.

My dearest Bastien,

We are all well, and I believe our dear Ivete will soon be engaged. She has danced her way into the heart of Harvey Burnham. You might remember him, though he is a few years your junior.

I cannot dally any longer and must tell you why I write. These words are difficult, but I must persevere. I, too, will soon be engaged. In our longing to see you, Luc and I found ourselves comforted in each other's presence. Through speaking and remembering you, we became fast friends. That friendship grew into a love I have never known. Much like you and I, Luc's and my childhoods are intertwined. Our families are close. It is the marriage and benefits that I expected to enjoy by marriage to you. Only now I see that you and I didn't have the same love as Luc and I share. I hope you can see the truth of the words I write and be happy for me. I hope you can love me as the sister Luc promises I soon shall be.

Your dearest friend,

Angelica

Bastien laughed, quietly at first, then loud enough to shake the snow from the powdered pines above. There was no accompanying letter from Luc, the coward.

Poor Angelica. Hers would be a marriage like Bastien's own mother and father had. Not the worst, not compared to Della's, but not a particularly happy one either. She would not enjoy the type of marriage Della had painted that day at the hot springs.

That was the marriage he wanted. She was the woman he wanted. *Della.*

He recalled her face, flushed from the steam that came off the hot water in the spring, embarrassed by his lack of clothes, adamant that she not get in. Would she ever trust him completely?

Her confession in Kirwin ran through his mind like a recurring dream. He tried to understand her secrecy regarding her past, then he thought of how she hid Angelica's letter. He pressed his lips together.

A gust of wind blew smoke into his eyes and threatened to rip the letter from his hands. He folded the vellum and slid it into the inner

pocket of his jacket. Standing, he turned the rabbit over the fire. He stared into the flames. Had Della been able to keep the stove going during his absence or was she even now cold. His heart lodged in his throat.

The idea of her discomfort prevented him from taking a calming breath. He should be there, making sure she was warm. An image of a faceless man, her husband, abusing her flashed into his mind. His jaw clenched.

Of course, she ran away and lied to everyone. She'd never been safe in her life. Why should she believe she was safe now? He'd certainly done nothing lately to prove otherwise to her. He'd done nothing to prove the limitless nature of his affection. All he'd done was turn his back on her truth.

Her withholding of the truth hadn't broken his trust, only his pride. He wished she had trusted him, but it didn't change his feelings for her. Only, his actions may have changed hers for him. He twisted in his seat to glance around the clearing. His horse was tied to the post, and the rabbit had finished cooking. He hoped his time away hadn't broken her trust in him completely. No matter how little sense it made, he still trusted her. Still loved her. He had no way to know how many years it would take for her to open up to him fully. It didn't matter. He would take her as she was, or as she could be. He loved every bit of her.

Standing, he raised a hand to shield the sun from his eyes. The day was not yet half over. He lifted the spit from the fire and kicked dirt and rocks over the fire pit. If he hurried, he could make it to Kirwin before nightfall.

Dusk settled on the green rooftops of Kirwin as he passed the Skinner's home. He would need to stop by and let Simon know he was back. Not yet, though. First, he needed to hold Della, to tell her he was sorry he left. To beg her forgiveness and build a fire in their stove if necessary.

He dropped his horse with Andrew and jogged to his cabin. He stopped outside. The lights were off. No smoke rose from the chimney. She could be asleep. If so, the lack of smoke meant she had struggled with the stove as he feared. He pushed the door open. "Della!" Silence. The cabin was empty. He spun and closed the door behind him. Maybe she was at the Skinners.

He rapped his knuckles on their door, and little Milo opened it.

"Hello, mate." Bastien leaned forward, his hands on his thighs. "Is Mrs. Graham here?"

Milo shook his head, and Lydia rushed over, gripping Milo's shoulder. "Bastien. I'm so glad you're here. Is Della with you?"

Bastien's stomach dropped. "No. I came to see if she was here."

Lydia shook her head and waved him in, closing the door behind him. "I went by your place this evening, and she was gone. We looked around town. Nothing. Simon went to the stable, but she didn't take a horse. Oh, Bastien. I think she might have gone into town with Bronco Nell."

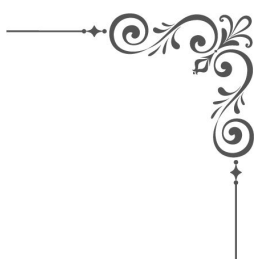
"Bronco Nell?"

"They ate together at the cafe yesterday."

"Yesterday? So they've been gone for a day now?"

Lydia's face pinched in misery. "I don't know. Maybe they waited until morning."

Bastien placed his hat back on his head and nodded to Lydia. "Tell Simon I'm heading into town to find my wife."



Della



DELLA WOKE TO THE SOUND of whispers in the dark.

“Oh, Mama, you shouldn't have come home. That bounty hunter Martin Greiner has been here, waiting for you. Is the wagon out?”

Della didn't recognize the low voice, the smells around her, or even the feel of her own bed. Panic rose in her chest. Where was she? The bounty hunter was here in Kirwin?

“Yes, it's out. We didn't have room for it in the barn, not until I get that meat dried.”

Bronco Nell. Of course. And the child's voice must be Bronco's daughter. And this was their cabin in Meeteetse. Oh yes. Now she remembered. She'd left Bastien, not that he cared or even knew.

Della raised her head, eyeing the small girl who spoke. She was maybe ten years old with a thick dark braid down her back.

“Della, this here is my daughter, Jenny.”

The girl dipped her head. “Pleased to meet you.” She turned back to her mother. Jenny's voice shook as she spoke. “Mama, you need to leave.”

“I'm not leaving my own house.” Bronco turned to Della. “You will want to stay inside, though. If Martin catches sight of you, he won't show mercy.”

Della tried to swallow, but all the wetness on her tongue had disappeared.

She crawled off the low bed and brushed the wrinkles from her skirts.

Bronco spoke to her daughter. “Della here is also known as Daisy Sturgis.”

Jenny gasped and squinted at Della. “From the wanted poster?”

“One and the same.” Bronco straightened the blankets on her bed as though this were an everyday conversation.

Della tried to catch Jenny's eye. “I'm no murderer.”

Bronco placed her hands on her hips. “She ain't goin' to turn you in. Now, Jenny, you and I are goin' to process that meat so we can hide the wagon in the barn. Della, since you can't leave, keep those curtains closed and make us some breakfast.”

With everyone assigned tasks, they all got dressed. Della folded her

bed and put the blankets in the closet.

As she worked, Della couldn't get away from the image of Martin Greiner loading that man into the wagon. She kept seeing herself as the body being handled and pushed. By the time she'd finished cooking breakfast, Bronco and Jenny hadn't returned. Della didn't dare go out to call for them. Not with Martin so near.

As she puttered around the house, a certainty came over her. Coming here had been foolhardy. Why had she been so sure Bastien would bring the law back with him? She lowered her brows in thought. That was the only situation that made sense. Men stick together. Her father and Walker certainly had the day Walker broke her finger. She turned to her father for escape, made him dinner, explained how evil her husband was. He'd sent her packing with a single crook of Walker's finger. Yes, men stuck together. Always had and always would. She had a right to clutch her anger as tightly about her as she might clutch a jacket.

Her heart skipped a beat. Bastien had made her a jacket, took her swimming in a hot spring, bought her fabric for sewing, gave her kind words every day they'd been together. He'd said he loved her, wanted to marry her. Maybe it had been foolhardy to leave. Maybe some men stuck to the women they loved and not to each other. Maybe Bastien hadn't gone for the authorities.

Della worried her bottom lip, her gaze focused on the purple and blue quilt on Bronco's bed. Walker was gone now, but somehow he still managed to make her suffer. She wasn't free, nor would she ever be. Della made a fist, her nails cutting into her palm.

The door to Bronco's house opened with a start. Bronco and her daughter came in, breathing into their hands for warmth.

Della poured them each tea and served breakfast.

They had barely finished when a knock sounded. They all froze, exchanging glances. With fluid grace, Bronco slid out of her chair and pulled her rifle from where it sat on two nails above the door. She cocked it, the clicks echoing in the silent house.

"Who is it?" she called through the wood.

Instead of an answer, the door flew open, hitting Bronco and causing her to stumble. Before she righted herself, Martin Greiner stood in the doorway, a gun aimed at Jenny's heart. "Glad to see you, Bronco." His eyes flashed to the woman, then back to Jenny. "I've been hoping you'd be back soon." His eyes roved over Della. "Is this another daughter?"

Bronco held her gun, but pointed it at the floor instead of Martin. "My step-sister. Come for a visit."

"Well, that's mighty good timing. Seeing as how you're going to be away for a while." He kept glancing at Della as though he was trying

to work out where he knew her from. "Your little girl here will need someone. It's not safe for her to be here all alone. Anyone could come in and make themselves at home, taking whatever they want."

Bile rose in Della's throat. Her eyes flicked to Jenny, who didn't seem to take his meaning. Relief escaped her in a sigh, though Jenny had been alone here, Martin had done nothing to the girl, only poked around in search of Bronco.

Martin's hard eyes bore into Della. "Do I know you? Where you visiting from?"

Bronco interrupted. "This ain't time for small talk. Get yourself and your gun out of my house."

"Fraid I can't do that, ma'am. You see, I found your still while you were away. Turned it into the authorities. Now they're waiting for me to bring you in."

Della remembered the liquid Bronco was drinking on the way to Kirwin that first day.

"I ain't got no still." To Bronco's credit, her voice sounded sure.

Martin stomped two steps closer to Jenny, his boots shaking the floor. He kept his attention on Bronco and thundered, "This ain't a discussion. Now, you're wanted, and you'll get in that wagon of your own accord, or I'll hogtie ya and put ya in there myself."

Della's eyes widened as Bronco lifted her gun. Martin swiveled towards her and pulled his trigger. The bang echoed in the small space, and Jenny cried out. Bronco still stood, and Della's eyes combed the cabin walls looking for where the bullet had gone.

When he spoke, his voice was low. "Next time, I won't miss."

Bronco turned her rifle, holding it with only her thumbs while she raised her other fingers. She placed the gun on the floor then stood with her hands high in a show of deference.

He jerked his gun towards the door. "C'mon."

Bronco ripped her jacket from the wall, swinging it over her shoulders and on her arms in one practiced movement. Martin tipped his hat at Della and Jenny, in a sick form of chivalry, before he closed the door.

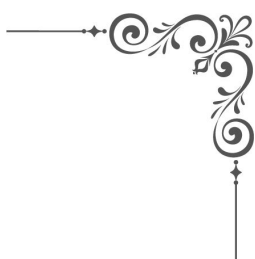
Jenny fell to her knees, her hands covering her face, and cried, deep wails that cut through Della's skin. Della knelt beside her and rubbed her back.

Jenny spoke through her tears. "How long will she be gone?"

Della shook her head. "I don't know." She couldn't even go into town and inquire because they'd recognize her.

A shout came from outside. Della and Jenny stared at each other in confusion. They sprang to their feet and went to the window. Bronco sat in the back of Martin's wagon and Martin was nowhere in sight. For the second time, Martin threw open the door and aimed his gun.

This time on Della.



Della



“YOU.” HIS EYES WERE narrowed on Della. “In the wagon.”

Jenny stepped forward. “You can’t. She didn’t do nothing.”

Martin spoke with a sinister calm. “A sign in town says otherwise. She’s wanted for murder.”

Della stumbled backward.

“I don’t have to bring you in alive. Seems shootin’ you would save ’em the trouble of hangin’ you.”

“I-I’m not her,” Della tried. “I’m Bronco’s step-sister.”

Martin smiled and strode to Della, grabbing her by the wrist. She tried to yank her arm free, but his hold grew tighter, grinding her bones together.

One glance at Jenny told Della the girl was falling to pieces. Della cried out, “Don’t you fret, Jenny. Your mom and I will be back before you know it.” After that, she went quietly. If Bronco couldn’t fight this man, Della stood no chance of freeing herself from his clutches.

“This your coat?” he asked, pulling it from the hook on the wall.

Della nodded, and he threw it at her.

Outside, Martin allowed Della to pull on her coat before tying her hands. With one arm around her back, he swept her legs and held her in his arms. The embrace was like a lover’s, but his smile was cruel. He dropped her in the wagon next to Bronco.

He hefted himself into the wagon seat, the two women shifting with the movement. Bronco leaned in and whispered, “I guess you wish you’d stayed on that mountain.” She gave a sorry shake of her head.

Tears wet Della’s eyes, making them colder as the wind of the moving wagon washed over them. Martin didn’t slow his wagon’s pace for the sake of the two women bouncing around in the back. It required most of Della’s mind and all of her energy to stay upright.

When they entered Meeteetse, a few gentlemen tipped their hats at Bronco, offering sad smiles but no help.

He pulled to a stop in front of the Sheriff’s office and gestured to Bronco. She dug her heels into the wood to drag herself towards the end of the wagon. Martin helped her down, acting like a gentleman as he guided her into the office.

Della waited, straining to see through the window. Soon, Martin appeared in the doorway. He held her wanted poster in hand. She'd thought him unsightly before, but now his face twisted like a demon's.

Della scooted to the edge of the wagon, preparing to hop to the ground.

Martin flicked his hand in her direction. "You're not getting out here, Daisy. Your bounty is in Omaha."

Della's jaw dropped. Would he make her ride all the way to Omaha like this? Couldn't they just hang her here in Meeteetse?

Della cast a glance at the road toward Bronco's home. She imagined poor Jenny there all alone. At least Della wasn't leaving behind any children. That was the one good outcome from her marriage to Walker. No babies.

When the wagon lurched forward, Della bounced the fifty miserable miles to Thermopolis. Martin stopped to water his horses and himself. He climbed into the back of the wagon and set a roll and bit of cheese in front of Della. With her hands tied, she was unable to do anything but stare at the food.

"It's a long way to Omaha," Martin said, cheese rolling around in his mouth. "What do you think about riding up front with me? It's a sight more comfortable than back here."

Della didn't answer.

Apparently, Martin didn't need an answer. "You look harmless enough, except this paper says otherwise." He patted his breast pocket where he'd placed her picture. "How will I know if I can trust you?"

Again, Della didn't speak.

"Come here." He motioned her to him. When she didn't move, he said, "Did you want to eat, or just stare at the food? Turn around." He made a circle gesture with his index finger.

Della turned herself around but didn't dare get closer to the viper. He loosened her ties, and the rope fell from her wrists. She winced as she brought her hands to the front, her chest aching as the frozen and seized muscles contracted. Her wrists burned red from the rough rope. She didn't waste time rubbing them. Instead she grabbed the cheese and bread. Not because she was starving, but because something about this man told her that he would take it back as soon as let her finish.

"You know, I've been bringing men in for years. Except for Bronco, you're my first woman." He raised one eyebrow. "More like a girl, I'd say." His eyes crawled along her body, and she tensed at his perusal. He bit into an apple with a loud crunch. "You know, everyone I bring in offers something at some point. Gold usually, which is stolen. As if I'd accept stolen goods. I uphold the law." His chest puffed at the statement, and he glanced at a lone rider passing by. "One man even

offered his wife. Nothing illegal about that.”

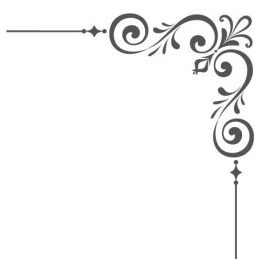
Della understood his meaning. “You’re saying if I lie with you, you’ll let me go?”

Martin gave a wicked laugh that shook the wagon. “Heavens no, sweetheart. I could get as much from any girl in that building.” He nodded at a saloon. “Just wonderin’ how desperate you are.”

“I’m not a murderer. My name isn’t Daisy. Take me to Omaha and find out.” Della lifted her chin. Men like this, she knew. He may feign upholding the law, but he was selfish to the core. He did it for the money, for power.

“Well, we’re staying here tonight. Our next stop is Casper, then Cheyenne. We’ll catch the train from there.”

Della pressed her lips, suppressing the tremble that threatened. The thought of returning to Omaha, of being turned over to one of Walker’s friends...The image of a particular friend swam into her vision and threaded with Martin’s suggestion that she give herself in exchange for freedom. One of Walker’s police friends had a fancy for Della. Even Walker had noticed the man’s doting attention. Did she have any sway over the man? Would his affection go far enough to save her life? But then Bastien clashed into her plans. She didn’t want to be with another man. There had to be another way.



Bastien



BASTIEN STEPPED OFF the train in Omaha, unsure if his job in Kirwin waited for him. He stared down the eastern track, which continued to Chicago. Turning, he breathed deep. He shouldn't have left. He should have worked things out when they were still snowed in, and she couldn't run away. She could be anywhere, but after learning she'd not been in Meeteetse, Omaha was the only place he knew to start.

He made his way to the police station and showed the poster. "I need to speak with someone about this woman."

"Yes, sir." The young boy left and returned with a round officer with a handlebar mustache.

"You're here about Daisy Sturgis?" The officer's voice was deep.

"Yes. I'd like to review her case. I believe she is innocent."

The policeman's face turned amused. "I won't be discussing an open case with a civilian. I'm not interested in theories. That woman killed her husband, a fine citizen of this city. Unless you can prove to me beyond a doubt that someone else killed that man, this case is already determined."

"It was self-defense." Bastien used the words Della had used, but his common sense sprang to the surface. "She is a small woman. How could she have knocked that man down and killed him?"

The officer raised an eyebrow. "You'd be surprised what even the smallest woman is capable of. If you have no more information, I must be going."

Bastien lifted a hand. "Wait."

The policeman turned, waited.

But Bastien didn't have anything else to say.

The officer shook his head in disgust and walked back into the belly of the station.

Bastien left the building for the bustle of the street, and the cold wind cleared his head. If the police weren't going to try to prove her innocent, he would have to find someone who could. The bank stood across the street. Bastien withdrew funds and asked for a reference to a law office.

Hours later, Bastien stood on the threshold of Mrs. Helena Clark's

home. His newly hired lawyer assisted him in finding her address and he tucked the paper into his coat pocket and knocked on the door. A mousy woman answered the door. Her eyes were sunken, and the sight of her face crushed Bastien's heart. If Della had been made to live with Walker all her life, she would have eventually shared her aunt's downtrodden demeanor.

"Helena Clark?"

"Yes." Helena squinted up at him. "Do I know you?"

"I'm acquainted with your niece, Della, or Daisy."

A fire lit her eyes. She must have been a beauty once. "Is she safe? Are you our dear James?"

"No, I'm not James. And I'm afraid I don't know if your niece is safe or not. I was hoping you'd heard from her."

The woman's eyes turned wary. "Who are you?" She drew further into her house.

"I'm a friend." He let out a huff of frustration. There was so much that had happened, so much to explain. "I love your niece, but she is missing."

"You love her? Is she not married?"

"I wish I had the time to explain everything. It's more complicated than I'd like, but Della's missing and I have to find her. I'm sure you understand."

She gave a slow nod.

"The short of it is James is dead. We're not married, but Della spent the winter with me"

"And now she's lost?"

Bastien nodded. "You haven't heard from her?" He knew the answer, but he needed to hear it spoken aloud.

"Not a word."

Bastien nodded. "If you hear from her, will you give her this?" Bastien held a letter, which he had written at the law office while waiting for Helena's address.

Helena nodded, taking the letter from his hands. She moved to close the door.

Bastien spoke again. "Also, I have hired a lawyer to prove her innocence. Someone may be coming by to take a statement. Please, tell them everything. Is there anyone else who might vouch for Daisy? Who might testify about how Walker abused her?"

Helena screwed up her face as she considered.

"If you think of anyone at all, please tell my lawyer. He is good at what he does. If there is any chance of overturning the warrant for Della's arrest, he will find it."

Helena gave a silent nod.

"Thank you."

She closed the door

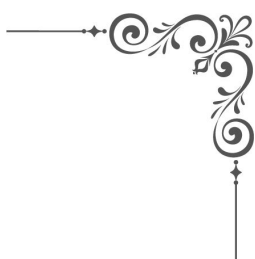
He turned his gaze heavenward. *Please let this work.*

After three days in Omaha, Bastien met one last time with his lawyer. He'd interviewed Della's aunt and father. Her brother was underage, so his testimony didn't count. Della's abrupt disappearance marked her as guilty in the eyes of most. Even if Bastien knew where Della was, he wouldn't risk bringing her here.

He closed his eyes, hoping against everything that Della hadn't rushed into some marriage. If she was as desperate as she'd been when he first met her, she might find someone to marry before Bastien had a chance to make his case.

Confident that his lawyer was invested in proving Della's innocence, he packed for Wyoming. Della had nothing here, only dark memories and jail time. He wasted his time searching for her this far east. Surely she would have gone further west, further from civilization that had treated her so poorly.

Before he left, he sent his lawyer a list of the towns in which he would be stopping on his way to Kirwin. They would coordinate so Bastien would be informed as soon as possible if any changes occurred before he reached the remote mountain town with a prayer in his heart that she be back in his cabin, waiting. He could scoop her up and take her to Montana before anyone in Kirwin knew the truth. Their fears that someone would discover the truth about their living situation paled compared to the real danger Della had been hiding. She didn't just risk ruination. She risked her life.



Della



AFTER DELLA'S SECOND miserable night trying to sleep on a hotel floor, Martin and Della made their way to the Cheyenne train station. Martin hadn't forced himself on her, but he took pleasure in handling her at every opportunity.

They found a seat on a glossy bench at the station, and Della scooted as far away from him as she could without catching his attention. Their train wasn't due for another hour. Martin lay his arm across the back, resting his hand on her shoulder. When she tried to move away from it, he only pulled her closer to him. She swallowed and closed her eyes, imagining Bastien's cabin; warm and safe, full of laughter and love.

She remembered that day at the hot spring. The warmth on her legs. The way Bastien's smile lit his entire face.

A train chugged into the station. The noise was achingly loud, and Della put her hands to her ears. Steam puffed from the wheels once it stopped, giving the passengers an ethereal appearance as they exited the car. A tall man stepped off, placing a worn hat on his head. His jacket was worn leather similar to Bastien's, and she closed her eyes once again, remembering the smell of his jacket wrapped around her.

"Della?" Bastien's voice rang out, but not in her mind.

Her eyes flew wide. She tried to stand, but Martin gripped her shoulder with a strength that caused her to cry out. "Bastien? What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for you." His eyes turned hard as they moved to Martin. "I'd appreciate you taking your hand from my wife."

Martin wound his arm around Della's waist, a snake about to swallow its prey. He smirked up at Bastien. "This here isn't your wife. She is Daisy Sturgis, and she's wanted for murder in Omaha."

Guests at the station stopped to watch the exchange. Bastien glanced at the faces and lowered his voice. "This is *my wife*."

"Well, if that's so, you must be lucky to have escaped your marriage with your life. She's wanted for killing her last husband." Martin smiled as he pulled the wanted ad from his pocket and held it out for Bastien.

"I know what you speak of." He didn't take the paper Martin

offered. "What do you want?"

"To do my civic duty and bring justice to her poor husband."

A muscle flickered in Bastien's jaw. Della glanced at his belongings, glad there was no gun included.

Bastien's eyes flicked to the crowd, catching the eyes of a few of the bystanders who turned away. "Might we all go somewhere private to discuss this matter?"

Martin stood and gripped Della's arm, his fingers digging into her flesh as he yanked her to standing. "If it is a matter of business, you may buy me a drink, but you will go ahead of us. I'll not be turning my back to you."

Bastien's gaze fell on Martin's hand and he pursed his lips. His eyes marked a slow path along Della's frame as though checking her for injuries. When he met her eyes, his face twisted with misery. He nodded. "Let's go then."

Martin and Della followed Bastien along the damp street to a nearby bar. When they entered, Martin crossed one hand over his chest to grip her upper arm and slid the other around her waist. He held her fast to him.

Again, Bastien's gaze landed on the way Martin touched her. He emanated a furious heat. "Sit." Bastien gestured to the table and chairs next to him.

Once everyone was seated, Bastien leaned forward. "The reward is fifteen hundred dollars. I will offer you five thousand if you give her to me now and never speak her name again."

Breath whooshed from Della's lungs. Not even Butch Cassidy had been worth five-thousand dollars.

Martin narrowed his eyes. How could he hesitate over such an immense sum of money? But hesitate he did, it seemed. "If she is your wife, as you claim, five thousand isn't enough. What kind of man would you be if you let her go to the gallows?"

Bastien snapped. He stood, his chair clattering to the floor. He leaned over the table and gripped the collar of Martin's threadbare shirt, lifting him out of his seat. Martin's hands jerked free of the grip he'd had on Della.

"You have no idea what kind of man I can be." Bastien's voice was dark.

Della gulped. She'd never witnessed this desperate and angry part of him.

The unmistakable click of a gun drew both Bastien and Della's eyes downward. Martin held a pistol to Bastien's stomach, the trigger cocked.

Bastien let go of Martin's collar, showing his palms in surrender. By now, the rest of the patrons had noticed the exchange, and all was

silent as a tomb.

Bastien kept his hands high and leaned away from Martin.

“Sit.” Martin sneered, his utter control and Bastien’s immediate obedience seemed to lift his spirits. “I’m a reasonable man. I’ll give you one day before I take this trash to Omaha.” He jerked his head at Della, not taking his eyes or the barrel of his gun from Bastien. “You will not follow us, nor will you inquire as to where we are staying tonight.”

She glanced at Bastien. He met her eyes briefly, but they revealed nothing.

“No,” Bastien said. “I take her today.”

Della’s eyes flashed back to Martin, hoping with every part of her that he would accept. Every morning she woke unmolested was a miracle. Such miracles didn’t last.

“I have the law on my side, Mr ...?”

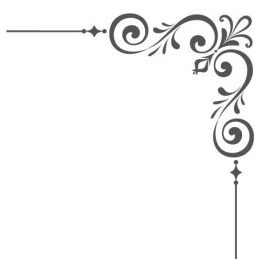
Bastien didn’t surrender his name.

The bounty hunter waved it away. “No matter. Your wife and I will be at the train station tomorrow at a quarter to one. Meet us there with your highest offer.” Martin leaned over the table, resting his forearm on the glossy wood. “And I will not counter. If your price isn’t acceptable, we will board the one o’clock train, and you can try your luck in Omaha.”

With his gun trained on Bastien, Martin gripped Della’s arm and pulled her along, both of them walking backward. They pushed through the swinging door that led to the street. She held Bastien’s eyes until the door closed and blocked her view.

“I think you might be worth more than I ever dreamed.” He squeezed her arm, whether in anger or glee, she couldn’t tell.

Della hardly felt the pain from his grip. Bastien was here! She’d revealed all and left him and still he wanted her.



Bastien



DESPITE MARTIN'S WARNING, Bastien turned to a young man who sat nearest their table. "You heard that?"

The man jerked his head away, as if he felt guilty for being caught eavesdropping.

"I'll give you fifty dollars to follow them and tell me which hotel they are staying in."

The kid stood and accepted the proffered bill with narrowed eyes. Once the youth was out the door, Bastien sat heavily in his chair. He glanced at the bartender, who too was staring at Bastien, and asked for a drink.

As he drank, he tried to plot. Della's face kept blurring his vision, confusing his plans. The terror in her eyes, the sadness as she left. The thought of her spending the night with Martin... Bastien gripped the tumbler so tightly his fingers squeaked against the glass.

Before he finished his drink, the young man returned, breathless.

"They're staying at Hotel Foxglove, sir."

Bastien gave him a nod and returned to his drink. When his drink was done, he stood and walked to the bar.

The bartender leaned in. "Another?"

"No. Where's the post office?"

The man pointed the index finger on his left hand. "'Bout ten buildings that way."

Bastien tipped the brim of his hat. "Thank you." The street was dirty, but the post office close. And best of all, he passed the Foxglove and a host of other hotels on the main street as he walked. Now he knew exactly where Della was. The fact lessened his terror a bit.

The post office door gave a hearty creak, and the postmaster lifted his head as Bastien entered.

"Any wires for Bastien Graham?"

The man shook his head, "Nothing today, sir."

Bastien stepped closer to the counter. "I need to send a wire."

The postmaster gathered his supplies, and Bastien dictated his message.

Urgent. Found Della. In custody of bounty hunter Martin Greiner. Make all haste. Bribe whoever. You have at most two days.

The postmaster gave Bastien a nod, his eyes brimming with interest.

“That’s urgent and also private.” Bastien gave him a hard stare.

The older man nodded, his chin quivering at his quick compliance.

“This is a matter of life and death. If I receive *any* correspondence, I will be staying at Hotel Foxglove. I will pay well for the swift delivery of anything coming in.”

The Hotel Foxglove occupied the corner of the street, presumably with rooms extending the length of both sides. At the corner stood a door that led to a small greeting area with a desk. The owner sat behind the desk, his paunch pressed against the wood.

“I need a room for tonight.”

The man stood and reached out a hand. “Mr. Charles Green. Pleased to meet you.”

Bastien shook it but didn’t give his name. “You had a Martin Greiner and a young lady check in earlier?”

Mr. Green’s eyebrows knit together. He was obviously not happy with the prospect of discussing patrons.

“I know they are here. I would like the room closest to theirs. A shared wall is best. I don’t care if the accommodations are a closet.”

Mr. Green gave Bastien a look that was a mix of embarrassment and worry. Grabbing a key from under the desk, he stood and gestured to Bastien.

“Follow me, sir.” They climbed stairs to the rooms and were almost to the end of the hall when the owner stopped and inserted the key.

He opened the door to a room that resembled the insides of a pig. Everything was lacy and pink and suffocating.

“Wife thought we ought to have a honeymoon suite. The new church that was built has brought more than a few couples to our doors.”

Bastien turned to the man, whose face was also tinged pink. “Thank you.” Bastien nodded and pulled the key from the lock. He entered the room and closed the door once Mr. Green had left. *At least he’s put me next to Della.* He placed his hat on the night table and sat on the bed. The springs gave a loud squeal, and despite his heavy heart, Bastien couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of a couple spending their first night together on a bed as loud as this.

He suspected Della and Martin were staying in the last room in the hallway. He lifted the glass from beside the ewer and placed it against the wall. He pressed his ear to the other end and listened. Silence. He tried the other wall. Still nothing. He opened his door and tried the wall to the room across from his. Quiet.

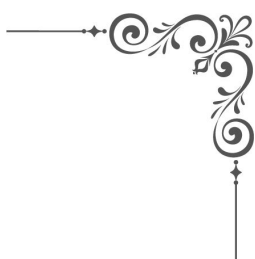
He returned to his room and lifted the Bible that lay on the night table next to his hat. He read in silence, waiting for some noise,

anything to confirm which room they were staying.

His mind wasn't on the words, and he read page after page without digesting any of the prophetic words. He closed the book and shut his eyes. The moment he'd seen Della at the train station, in the leather jacket he'd gifted her, he thought it had been a vision. Her sudden appearance was so unexpected, so miraculous. If they were on their way to Omaha, they were taking the same route he'd taken. Kirwin to Casper to Cheyenne to Kearney and on to Omaha.

This would be Della's third night with that man. Was it possible he'd not hurt her in that time? How could he leave her to spend another night in such a situation? He'd rather kick down every door in this hallway until he delivered Della to freedom. But he couldn't. Bastien closed his eyes, and the image of Martin's hands around her waist assailed him. Rage brought him to his feet.

He had to calm down. She didn't seem bruised. She didn't have the wild look in her eyes of an abused woman. The only marks were on her wrist, and he suspected she'd had them tied at one point. He rolled the anger out of his shoulders and sat back down with a thud. Martin had the law on his side. If Bastien didn't tread carefully, Della could be turned over to authorities in a blink. He sighed and fell backward onto the bed. Whether she'd been abused or not, he would keep vigil tonight. If there was any commotion from their room, he would hear it. Only then would he start breaking down doors.



Della



DELLA'S HEART RACED as Martin dragged her to the train station. Regardless of the sneering courage he had used with Bastien, they hadn't ventured from the room yesterday or this morning. The bounty hunter seemed torn between despising Della and overjoyed with the prospect of what funds he might gain from his troubles.

They found a seat on the same bench they used yesterday. Bodies bustled around them, and the crowd seemed to calm Martin's nervous movements. His gaze darted about. Probably because of his excitement at his prospective wealth.

The station boasted a brick clock tower that stood tall and grand to their right. Della struggled to keep her eyes from it. There were only ten minutes until their train arrived at one o'clock.

"He better be coming."

Della gulped. Bastien had looked at her yesterday like a man come in from the range and thirsty for a drink. When he'd offered the money, she thought she'd been saved. Now, with only ten minutes to spare, she was just as certain that he'd changed his mind. Five-thousand dollars had been an unbelievable amount. More was impossible.

She might scream from the stress. Doubts skittered up and down her spine. Her hand jerked with the urge to slap Martin, to tell him he was a fool and he should have taken the money yesterday and bettered both of their lives. Just as the words made it to her lips, Bastien strode around the corner.

His face showed no joy, his hard eyes trained on Martin. The stress from waiting for Bastien to arrive was nothing compared to the stress she now felt. It threatened to explode out of her like a hissing teakettle. Now was the time to call Martin's bluff. Would he accept the counteroffer or take her on to Omaha? Would Della be free or would she hang?

Bastien's eyes met hers for the briefest of moments, and she could swear she saw hope. Or maybe her desperation caused her imagination to run wild with her deepest desires.

Bastien held out a note to Martin.

Martin eyed the paper. "I don't want a banknote. I want cash."

Nevertheless, his eyes tried to read the text on the paper that faced Bastien.

“It's not a banknote.” Bastien's voice was smug.

Martin lowered his brows and snatched the paper from Bastien's hand.

His lips moved as he read the note. Della tried to lean over, but she couldn't read the words.

Martin crushed the paper in his hand. “This is false.”

“It is not.” Bastien offered a hand to Della.

She reached out to take it, but Martin slapped his hand on her wrist and clamped it against the wooden seat of the bench.

Bastien curled his outstretched hand into a fist. His sleeve quivered with the anger Della sensed rolling under his skin. “I'll ask you once more to unhand my wife.” His voice was controlled, but it held a note of authority.

Martin stood, jerking Della to her feet as he went nose-to-nose with Bastien.

Bastien's jacket creaked as he leaned backward, and looked over Della's shoulder.

She looked, too.

A police officer came around the corner and surveyed the scene. His eyes fell on Della. “Are you a Ms. Daisy Sturgis?” She gulped at the use of her married name.

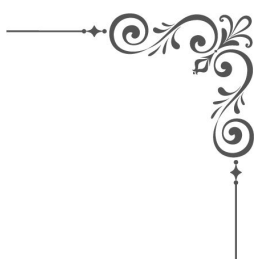
Her eyes slid to Bastien's, and she nodded. If she were to be hung, at least she wouldn't have to spend another minute with Martin Greiner.

“You have been cleared of all charges.”

Martin drew a sharp breath, still holding her wrist. “Nonsense. I have her wanted poster right here.” He touched his breast with his free hand.

“Yes, sir. We have that poster as well. Omaha police force has investigated the murder of a Mr. Walker Sturgis, and she has been found innocent.”

Della glanced at her wrist, now freed of Martin's iron grip, only to see him reaching for his gun. “No!” She threw herself into him. If she were truly free, she'd use her freedom to do something worthy and save the man she loved.



Bastien



A SHOT RANG OUT, ITS sound echoing around the walls of the train station. Women screamed, and people ran. Bastien lunged, pulling Della into his arms. She was shaking.

He held her to him as if to protect her from another bullet. “Are you hurt?”

When she didn’t answer, he straightened his arms, raking his eyes along a spot of blood on her skirt.

“You’re hit.” He groped at the fabric, trying to move it away and see her injury.

“I’m not hit.” Her voice didn’t waver and was a balm to his rising panic.

“You’re not?” He searched her face. Was she lying to him?

“I’m not.” Her eyes widened in shock as though noticing the blood for the first time.

They both turned to Martin. He held his hip, blood oozing from between his fingers.

The lawmen seemed to realize the situation when Della and Bastien did. They rushed Martin, clapped his wrists in handcuffs, and marched him from the train station despite his shouts of protest. “I was upholding the law. That tramp is the one who should be in handcuffs. I was helping you!”

Once his cries died away, Bastien’s hands cupped Della’s face. “Are you hurt? I mean, before today, did he hurt you?”

Della’s throat bobbed as she shook her head. Bastien pulled her to him again, torn between the desire to stare at her face and to hold her tight.

He glanced at the ground by the bench. “Do you have any belongings?”

“No. He took me from Bronco’s house.”

“You were in Meeteetse?”

Della gave a frustrated snort. “Well, not the whole time. Most of the time, I was being hauled like cargo to my death.”

Bastien laughed, thankful her perk had returned.

Her eyes filled with hope. “Am I really free of charges? Were those real police officers?”

“They were. And you are.” Bastien smiled, tucking her hand in the crook of his elbow.

“How ...”

“That’s why I was late today. I had word this morning from my lawyer that he’d found a favorable judge. He expected the charges to be overturned. I begged him to take whatever means necessary to reverse them before one o’clock.” Bastien gave a tired laugh. “He almost didn’t.”

“But he did?” Della’s eyes were tight with doubt.

“Della, you’re free. Or would you like me to call you Daisy?”

Della lowered her brows. “Not Daisy.”

“It fits you well. You’re like those Aster Daisies that bloom in harsh conditions.”

She smiled up at him. “Della will be just fine.” Her face turned wistful. He let her dream as he led her through the street. Her life had had too little dreaming in it before now. But he’d change all that. They turned and climbed the steps to the Hotel Foxglove.

Mr. Green greeted them. “Can I get you a room?” His curious gaze roved over Della, lingering on the blood staining her dress.

Bastien turned to Della. “Would you like a room to yourself?”

She blinked, apparently coming out of her reverie.

Bastien leaned closer and murmured in her ear. “It may not be appropriate to share a room since we are unmarried.”

Della scoffed and turned hooded eyes to Mr. Green. “One room, please.”

The manager gave them a nod and pulled a key from under the desk. The manager led them up the stairs and along the same hallway, stopping at the door to the room Bastien had slept in the night before. Once the door was opened, Mr. Green wore a knowing smile and lifted his eyebrows at Bastien before turning back for the stairs.

“This room is splendid.” Della crowed as she walked inside.

“I hope this isn’t what you’d like our home to look like.”

Della spun on her heel, her smile gone.

“That is if you would like to marry me.”

“I didn’t think you’d marry me, not after you knew.”

Bastien moved a step towards her and grasped her hand. “It doesn’t matter. It never mattered. It was only my pride at being fooled that made me leave. It was never you.”

He knelt, wishing he had taken the time to purchase a ring. “Please say yes.”

Della laughed through the tears that rimmed her eyes. She nodded, pulling his face to hers. She kissed his forehead and cheeks, finally making her way to his mouth. He gripped her shoulders and held her back.

“Say it,” he whispered against her lips. “Say you’ll marry me.”

“I’ll marry you,” she breathed back. He pressed a kiss into her, and she responded by pulling him closer.

When he finally broke for air, he found her expression dreamy again. He traced his finger across her cheek. “I hear there’s a beautiful chapel in this town. Shall we see if it meets your standard?”

Della surveyed her blood-stained clothes. “I doubt I’ll meet *their* standard.”

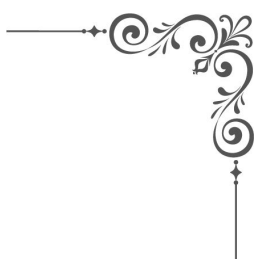
“I think we can sort that out. I have fifty thousand dollars burning a hole in my pocket.”

Della’s eyes bulged. “Where did you get that much money?”

“I had to swallow my pride and ask my father for my inheritance. I didn’t learn you would be cleared until the last moment. I wasn’t about to let that man take you away on a train.”

“You were going to give him fifty thousand dollars?” Della choked on her words.

“He already had everything.” Bastien held her gaze, and he hoped she would finally see her worth to him. More than money, more than anything.



Epilogue

DELLA SAT NEXT TO BASTIEN on the buckboard bench. A beautiful Montana valley lay sprawled before them.

A rider reigned in on Bastien's side of the wagon. "Ho, there." The man smiled, tipping his hat at Della.

Bastien grinned at the rider. "Thomas. I didn't expect to see you until we reached the ranch." He turned to Della. "This is the man helping me with the breeding and livestock. Thomas, this is my beautiful wife, Della."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

Della dipped her head. "And you."

"Three colts since you left. Strawberry had twins, as we expected."

Bastien smiled at the news. "She certainly ate enough to be baking two in there. There is much to discuss tonight."

"Until tonight." Thomas flashed another smile at Della and urged his mount forward.

"He's young. You sang praises of his experience, and I figured him for a weathered old man."

Bastien chuckled. "Not old, but smart and willing to work hard."

Della arched her aching back.

Bastien's face twisted in sympathy. "Just over that rise and you'll be able to see the house."

"I'm fine, just stretching. Are you sure your mother and sister will enjoy being out here?" The nearest town where they'd stopped for a meal was smaller than Meeteetse.

"Mother, not likely. Her idea of an adventure is eating food not made by Chef. But the reason for coming will ease her discomfort." He grinned and looked sidelong at Della. "Ivete is not such a city girl as you might guess. When we would summer at our grandparents' country home she spent her days fly fishing. She's been raised with only brothers and is not so prim as she appears."

"Her fiancé did not appear to have any such affinities." Ivete's fiancé had nearly glowed with all his silks and diamonds. Never in her life had Della seen such a well-dressed man.

"I hope you and Ivete can be friends."

Della's cheeks heated, though she should have forgotten her embarrassment by now. More than a week had passed since her humiliating introduction to the Graham family. "We will get along just fine, dear." Della placed a gloved hand on Bastien's arm. Ivete was kind, but Della doubted their difference in upbringing would ever

allow them true friendship.

The road weaved through rolling land. At the crest of the largest hill, Della spied a house on the right.

Her husband leaned closer, planting a kiss into her hair. "There it is."

The meadow in front of the rambling house was filled with splotches of purple and yellow and red.

Bastien put words to her thoughts. "I couldn't find a book of wildflowers for this region. You'll have to author one yourself."

She and Lydia had worked on her reading and writing while Bastien was setting up a house here in Montana. Now she would use those skills to correspond with Lydia.

Della bumped her arm against Bastien's. "Your mine will need a good foreman. Someone like Simon, perhaps ..."

He smiled. "It has a good foreman. I don't want to make enemies the moment I arrive."

He was right, of course, but Della would dearly miss her friend. They drew nearer to the house and Della saw the carved and painted sign that hung above the gate.

Aster Ridge Ranch

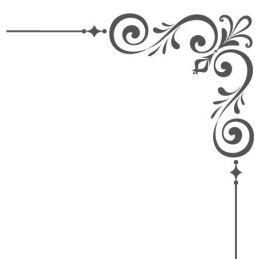
She turned to Bastien, "Asters?"

He grinned. "They're everywhere. When I saw them I knew this was where we belonged."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. As they pulled to a stop in front of the house she finally understood the full scope of its size. Gracious. It was huge. "Do we need all this space?"

"That little one will need space to grow." He nodded down at Della's stomach, which had yet to show any signs of the baby within.

Della smiled up at him, her eyes dancing. "Yes, husband."



Also by Kate Condie

Aster Ridge Ranch

[Ticket to Anywhere](#)

[A Winter's Vow](#)

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[A Widow's Vow](#)

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About the Author

Kate Condie is a speed talker from Oregon. Reading has been part of her life since childhood, where she devoured everything from mysteries, to classics, to autobiographies—and of course, romance. At first, her writing was purely in journal format as she thought writing novels was for the lucky ones. She lives in Utah and spends her days surrounded by mountains with her favorite hunk, their four children and her laptop. In her free time she reads, tries to learn a host of new instruments, binge watches anything by BBC or tries to keep up with Lafayette as she sings the Hamilton soundtrack.